SHADOW SLAVE
IV
CHAIN BREAKER

# Shadow Slave

*Volume-4*

*Chain Breaker*

# Chapter-601: Kingdom of Hope

Sunny dreamt of boundless blue skies.

Beneath them, a patchwork of islands floated in the air, laid on the backdrop of velvety darkness like a beautiful mosaic. Some islands were verdant and green, some were desolate and empty, and some were covered by ancient ruins, the weathered stones overgrown by moss.

All of them were bound by colossal iron chains that rattled loudly as the islands rose and fell, hovering above the abyss, a scattering of pale stars shining somewhere far, far below them. In the center of the mosaic, an ugly wound gaped, a vast tear in space where nothing but emptiness remained.

A lone island soared above that tear, seven torn chains hanging from its slopes, a beautiful white pagoda standing on its surface in a mantle of clouds.

Suddenly, the sun rolled backward, soon disappearing behind the eastern horizon. The skies darkened, and then were illuminated again as a radiant moon streaked across them, swift enough to turn into a blurry trail of light. A moment later, it was day again, and then, it was night once more.

The skies grew torn between light and darkness, time flowing in reverse with terrible speed. Sunny watched as the islands beneath him slowly changed their shapes, as ruins rose from the ground and assembled into unwavering structures, as the stars burning in the abyss grew brighter and brighter, new ones igniting each moment, until the whole void was suffused with a furious white light.

One after another, fallen islands rose from that annihilating light, the chains that had tethered them to the rest of the mosaic repairing themselves. Soon, the tear in its center was no more, and instead, a

vast ashen wasteland of scorched isles appeared in its place. The Ivory Tower descended from high above, taking its place at the very heart of the wasteland.

An instant later, the ashes were no more, revealing a breathtaking aerial city that sprawled across dozens of islands, all of them connected to each other by arching bridges and overflowing aqueducts built out of pristine white stone, with vibrant flags fluttering in the wind and sparkling waterfalls flowing into the abyss below.

Slowly, Sunny's gaze was pulled west, toward the very edge of the Chained Isles. There, one of the Great Chains anchored them to the lands beyond, and a mighty fortress stood at the precipice, similar to the other border strongholds he had seen before.

The island next to it resembled a vast stone bowl, with rows of seats cut into its weathered white slopes and a circular arena laying at its bottom, painted dull red.

And even further than that was an island with a strange river that flowed endlessly through it, forming a circle around an ancient statue of a beautiful woman wielding a spear in one hand, and gripping a beating human heart in the other, her nakedness covered only by a beast hide tied around her thighs, her face lost in the shadows.

That was the island where Sunny found himself.

...And of course, he was thrown straight into the damn river.

'G—goddammit! Why does this keep happening to me?!'

Sunny was so angry that he didn't even feel any panic, unlike the previous two times the Spell had decided to give him a cold and wet welcome — first on the Forgotten Shore, then at the Sanctuary of Noctis.

This time, at least, he had an idea of where he was, and in which direction to swim if he wanted to reach the surface.

Sunny strained his muscles to struggle against the strong current…

And finally realized that something was terribly, terribly wrong.

His body refused to listen… or rather, it did, but in a way that made no sense at all. His limbs didn't move as he willed them to, and instead of swimming, he simply thrashed around, submerging deeper and deeper into the cold, dark water. His senses were all messed up, too, so he couldn't even understand what had gone wrong.

'W—what the hell?!'

Now, Sunny finally was starting to panic a little.

This went way beyond what he had experienced in the First Nightmare. Back then, the body given to him by the Spell had felt almost the same as his own… this time, however, it was way too unfamiliar!

Was this what Master Jet had warned him about?

Sunny tried to keep calm and swim ashore, but moving through water, especially with such a strong current, was not an easy task. It required a lot of coordination and a fair bit of balance, which he simply lacked right now. No matter what he tried to do, his efforts only made things worse.

He fell deeper and deeper into the river, drowning slowly.

His lungs were already starting to burn from the lack of oxygen… they also felt as weird as the rest of him. His vision was already darkening…

Sunny gritted his teeth, which suddenly sent a wave of pain through his mouth and jaw, and then stopped struggling, letting the current pull him down. Then, he concentrated on his shadow sense… and, as soon as his body struck the rocky bottom of the river, stepped through the shadows to appear near the stone statue.

Sunny fell into the grass. Coughing violently, he tried to suck in a breath of fresh air, only to find out that even that was a struggle. His lungs were refusing to work as they were supposed to, and even though he managed to inhale, it was still not enough to chase the sensation of suffocating away.

'What… is going on… damn it!'

Sunny sprawled on the ground and closed his eyes, cutting off all of his senses to concentrate on trying to take control of the mess of his new body.

'Don't think. Thinking will only make things worse. This thing has to have instincts… you now have them, too…'

He cleared his mind of any thoughts about breathing and oxygen, and soon, his instincts did, indeed, take over. It was like the story of a centipede that was asked how it walked, and fell down, unable to move. As soon as Sunny stopped thinking about inhaling, his body did so on its own.

Suddenly, his lungs were full of sweet air, and he was strong and vigorous once more.

'Oh, thank gods…'

Sunny did not move for a few moments, breathing deeply, and then tried to understand what type of a vessel, exactly, had the Spell chosen for him…

Before he could, however, a beautiful voice suddenly sounded above him, full of curiosity and amusement:

"What a strange thing you are…"

Sunny opened his eyes and struggled to rise to his feet, turning his head swiftly in the direction of the speaker.

When he did, he froze.

In front of him, kneeling near the statue, was perhaps the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She had soft skin and a delicate, exquisite face, her chestnut hair streaming down her shoulders like lustrous silk. Her eyes were suffused with light and shone gently, like two silver stars.

Sunny had seen a lot of stunning beauties in his lifetime, but no one could even remotely compare to the quiet, breathtaking grace of this

stranger. Just one look at her made his heart race, and his face flush. She was more like a fairy than a mere mortal…

And, maybe, she was.

The beautiful woman was wearing a simple red tunic that left her shoulders bare, and wielded no weapons. Despite that, her presence was vast and permeated the whole island. It was as though the blades of grass bent slightly to be closer to her, the rays of sunshine changed their path to caress her skin. As if she didn't exist in the world, but instead, the world existed around her.

And something... something about her felt strangely familiar.

Sunny opened his mouth, stunned, and said:

"Uh… greetings?"

…Or at least, he tried to. However, what came out of his mouth instead was a hoarse, bestial growl.

'What the…'

He tried to speak again, and once more, his mouth produced a low, threatening gnarl.

The woman frowned.

"One of Shadow God's creatures… how curious. I didn't know that there were any of you left here, in the Kingdom of Hope."

Sunny stared at her, dumbfounded. Then, he lowered his eyes and finally looked at himself.

'Oh… crap…'

Well, at least one of his desires had come true. Sunny wasn't short anymore. In fact, he was at least two meters tall.

The problem, however…

Was that he wasn't a human.

His skin was light grey, the color of stone. His legs were long and digitigrade, bending backward and ending with powerful, sharp claws. He had four arms, each longer and stronger than that of a human, and a long twisting tail. His face was like that of a demon, with sharp features and a mouth full of terrifying fangs.

Two curved horns were growing from his forehead, and his hair was long, black, and coarse.

His eyes were fully black, with no irises and two vertical, furious pupils.

…What's worse, Sunny didn't seem to possess the vocal cords of a human.

He couldn't speak.

'Oh, crap!'

The beautiful woman looked at him, and smiled.

Her smile was dazzling and breathtaking, but made Sunny feel cold and scared, for some reason.

"You shouldn't have invaded my lands, little creature. But don't worry… I will gift you a death most glorious. This, I promise before the gods."

She rose, standing tall in front of the ancient statue.

"After all, I, Solvane, am nothing if not merciful…"

# Chapter-602: Swarm of Shadows

'Slow down there, lady…'

Sunny tried to take a step back, but ended up staggering and almost falling down. Somehow, he managed to keep his balance, crouching as his talons dug into the ground. His four arms rose, sharp claws aimed at Solvane.

All that talk of glory and death made him very, very tense.

'Solvane… wait. Solvane?'

A low growl escaped from Sunny's mouth as he realized who was standing in front of him. So this beautiful, graceful woman… she was the ghastly living corpse he had destroyed in the cargo hold of the crashed ship? Or rather… would be?

He had traveled into the past of the Chained Isles, after all, or at least an illusory reenactment of it. It made sense that Solvane had not succumbed to her harrowing fate.

...Yet.

Sunny shivered, remembering the silent pleading and boundless torment in the empty eyes of the Wormvine's host. How could those terrible eyes be the same as the radiant ones looking at him right now?

Suddenly, he was overwhelmed by pity, compassion, and sorrow.

And fear.

Because if he was right and this was really the same Solvane, then this dazzling stranger who had just promised to gift him a glorious death… was a Saint.

And a Saint promising to kill him was not something Sunny had ever wanted to hear.

He peered beneath the surface of Solvane's lovely figure, and saw a single sphere of light burning brightly in her chest, so radiant as to appear almost blinding. Her soul core… the soul core of a Transcendent.

His vertical pupils narrowed, a single thought ringing in his mind:

'Run!'

Sunny felt that his body was much more powerful than his own, inhumanly so, but without knowing how to properly control it, outrunning a Saint was out of the question. If it had ever been. So, his only hope was Shadow Step…

He already started to fall into the shadows when a beautiful silhouette suddenly appeared near, a graceful hand falling from above to grasp one of his arms into an iron grip. If not for Bone Weave, his wrist would have shattered like glass.

The hold of a Saint was as inevitable and inescapable as death.

Sunny couldn't escape into the shadows anymore, and summoning any Memory would have taken too long to be of any use…

All except for one.

A ghostly stiletto suddenly appeared in his trapped hand and awkwardly shot upward, leaving a thin scratch on Solvane's perfectly smooth, silky skin.

She glanced at the scratch, which was slowly welling with blood, a single crimson drop falling on the verdant grass. Her luminous eyes glistened.

"Is this fate, then? A sacrifice of blood was made, on the altar of War. Little shadowspawn, how special you are! Ah, so be it…"

With that, she smiled radiantly.

In the next moment, her other hand moved forward, and before Sunny could even feel fear…

The world exploded with pain, and then turned utterly dark.

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Shadows… shadows…

Sunny was surrounded by shadows.

Some were close to him, and some were far. Some were small, and some were large. Some moved, and some were still.

He was one of the shadows, too.

No… not one. A swarm of them. A legion of shadows, all hidden in one vast and lightless soul. Silent and tranquil, free of all burdens. Free of all desires, free of reason and will.

For now…

'Ugh… my head hurts…'

Slowly, Sunny regained his senses. The first thing he felt was pain, and then, the steady beating of his hearts. Hearts? Yes… apparently, he had two now. As well as four lungs.

His body was heavy and unfamiliar, too large, too cumbersome, and too strange. Something hard and cold was pressed against it, making him feel a dull pain in his limbs. His head ached, too, as if he had been struck on it hard enough to shatter a weaker skull.

Well… he had been. Had he not?

The breathtaking beauty, Solvane, hit him. She killed him.

'Damnation… why am I still in pain if I am dead? What nonsense is this?!'

Full of outrage, Sunny tried to chase the pain away. But it remained. Why wouldn't it disappear? It wasn't supposed to torment him still.

Unless… he wasn't dead.

And the Saint had not, in fact, killed him with one strike.

Sunny hissed, and opened his eyes.

What he saw made him stare for a few moments, and then laugh. Or rather, he wanted to laugh, but what came out of his mouth instead was a chilling, deeply disturbing, uneven wail.

'Oh, gods… this is just too on the nose, really! Come on!'

Sunny was so amused because the hard and cold things pressed painfully against his body… were the sturdy bars of an iron cage.

He was in a cage again, and there was a steel collar wrapped around his neck.

Sunny was, once again, turned into a slave.

'Hey, Spell! Is this funny to you? Are you happy with yourself, you wretch?!'

His new cage was way smaller than his previous one in the Night Temple. In fact, it was barely large enough to fit his lanky body with all its limbs, claws, and horns. The cage was hung from the ceiling by a rusty chain, and his every move caused it to sway lightly, the bars digging painfully into his flesh.

Sunny growled angrily and looked around, trying to make sense of his previous sensations. What were all the other shadows he had felt close by…

'...Crap.'

All around him were rows of hanging cages of different sizes, and each of them imprisoned a creature of some sort. There were monstrous wolves, stone gargoyles, giant slithering worms, bulging mounds of flesh with gaping circular maws, and all kinds of abominations, some of which he had seen and fought before, and some that he had never even heard of.

There were closed metal boxes that produced the sound of hundreds of small feet rustling against their surface, and cages large enough to fit a Chain Worm. In fact, there was a Chain Worm trapped in one not too far away from Sunny. There were even cages that contained humans.

Sunny stared at this dungeon of horrors for a bit, and shivered.

'What the hell is this place…'

# Chapter-603: Menagerie of Monsters

Sunny stared at the menagerie of monsters for a bit, getting used to the fact that his eyesight was different now, too. His eyes seemed to be much keener and were naturally able to see in utter darkness — as opposed to being gifted this trait by his Aspect — but had trouble differentiating colors.

The world was basically black and white, or rather consisted of various shades of grey, similar to how he used to see the world through shadows. His sense of smell was also enhanced, overloading his mind with an avalanche of new information. It was hard to concentrate on any one thing, let alone make sense of all this mess.

'Ah, who cares. Let's just get out of here.'

Just like in the Night Temple, the cage limited his shadow sense. However, this one did not sap him of shadow essence, which was a pleasant surprise.

Sunny's joy was short-lived, however.

As soon as he tried to Shadow Step away, he realized that he couldn't teleport through the iron bars. What's more, even his shadows couldn't slide through them, as though there was an invisible barrier blocking their way.

Sunny gritted his teeth, and felt a sharp pain as his fangs sunk into the soft flesh inside his mouth. He tried to curse, and produced a furious growl instead. After that, he simply remained motionless for a bit, staring at the other prisoners of the dungeon with gloomy resentment.

'Curse it all.'

Finally, he shook his head and awkwardly knelt at the bottom of the cage, grasping the iron bars with all four of his hands. Moving twice the amount he had possessed previously was a bit of a challenge, but he did manage after a couple of attempts.

'Fine. There are other methods… I'll melt this whole damned cage, if necessary.'

He stretched one hand through the bars, and summoned the Cruel Sight.

And then… nothing happened.

The only thing that changed was that his steel collar turned a little colder for a moment.

Sunny frowned, his black eyes growing even darker, then tried again.

The somber weapon did not appear. There was no tenebrous mist shrouding his hand, and no feeling of a small portion of his shadow essence disappearing to grant the Memory a physical shape.

Feeling unease, Sunny lingered for a second, and then tried to summon the Midnight Shard.

Once more, his collar grew colder for a moment, and nothing happened.

'What… what is going on…'

One after another, Sunny tried to manifest all of his Memories, to the same result. His Memories refused to appear, and not even a single spark of ethereal light ignited in the darkness of the dungeon. It was almost… as if they were all gone. Stolen.

Even Weaver's Mask…

Panicking, he hurriedly summoned the runes, hoping to see that he was wrong, that the list of his Memories did not turn empty.

'No, no, no, no, no!'

But…

The familiar shimmering runes did not appear. There was nothing in the air in front of him, just cold and dark emptiness.

'Wait… what?'

Sunny called the runes forth again and again, but they were inexplicably gone. His collar was now as cold as ice.

'Can't be!'

It was almost as if…

As if he was completely cut off from the Spell.

When the realization hit him, Sunny leaned heavily on the bars of the cage and remained motionless for a while, utterly stunned.

What kind of a Nightmare was that?

How was it even possible to lose connection to the Spell?

Spell! It was the Spell, damn it! The terrifying, almighty Spell!

Who could snatch an Awakened away from it?

He wasn't even able to enter his Soul Sea…

The scale and scope of this tectonic change simply failed to fit into his mind. Sunny had spent so long living with the Spell that he almost didn't remember what existing without it felt like. It was as though an integral part of his being was suddenly taken away, leaving him hollow and incomplete.

'I don't understand…'

…He was still trying to cope with this new reality when heavy footsteps suddenly resounded in the ghastly dungeon. Raising his head, Sunny saw a giant of a man walking between the hanging cages, his powerful figure radiating a sense of vast, solemn strength. The man was wearing a worn leather armor and a tattered red robe,

its edges frayed and torn.

On his back, a barbarous curved blade hung, wide and heavy enough to split any abomination in half, and on his belt, heavy chains rattled with each step.

The giant's face was hidden beneath a hood, but Sunny didn't need to see it to know that he was looking at an Ascended.

And that Ascended was walking straight to his cage.

'Now is my chance! But, uh… to do what, exactly?'

Sunny was not accustomed to his new monstrous body, and was devoid of the ability to summon Memories. He was unarmed and defenseless. He didn't even know if his Aspect still worked.

What was he supposed to do? Try to fight a Master with his bare fists… claws, or whatever… or wait and see what happens?

In the end, the cautious part of his mind won.

Sunny silently stared as the man in the red robe approached the cage, glanced at him, and then somehow made the iron bars disappear without a trace.

One moment they were there, and the next, they were gone, throwing Sunny to the ground.

The giant cruelly slammed his massive fist into Sunny's head, and before he had a chance to shrug off the disorientation, a thick chain was already fastened to his collar.

Then, Sunny was dragged somewhere, sliding across the dirty floor as the collar dug painfully into his neck.

Not too long after that, bright sunlight suddenly blinded him. A sharp pain pierced his black eyes, and a moment later, Sunny was thrown ruthlessly to the ground, landing on it in a graceless heap. Still unable to see, he felt the chain being removed from his collar.

Slowly, his eyes adjusted to the light, and even though his vision was

not as good as it had been in the darkness, Sunny was able to see that he was sprawled on the stone floor of a circular arena.

All around him, rows of seats rose, cut from pristine white stone to form a vast amphitheater. The theater was not crowded, and yet there were a lot of humans seated in it, looking down at him with joy and excitement. They were dressed in simple tunics and other kinds of archaic garments, most of them of some shade of red.

The arena itself was not white like the rest of the amphitheater… instead, it was dull red, too.

Or rather, it might have been pristine once, but now, its stone surface had absorbed too much blood and changed color.

Sunny looked up and saw another monster being let off its chain some distance away.

A cold shiver ran down his spine.

…Yes, he was a slave again.

But it seemed that, this time, fate had made him a very different kind of slave.

'Wait… don't tell me…'

As the crowd of spectators cheered, the other monster roared, spun around… and fixed its bloodthirsty eyes on Sunny.

'It's a damned colosseum!'

# Chapter-604: Shadow Gladiator

There were wooden fences built throughout the arena, partitioning it into many small enclosures, each connected to a next one by a rusty iron gate. Currently, Sunny was at the very edge of the colosseum, with one of its stone walls behind him. Three sturdy fences formed the rest of the killing box, sharp spikes mounted on them to prevent the combatants from trying to escape.

…And that was unmistakably where he found himself — a colosseum. A theater of death where slaves fought each other for the entertainment of the crowd, unless they wanted to be slaughtered by the other gladiators or their own masters.

Granted, this one was rather strange. For one thing, the slaves were predominantly wild beasts and monsters of all kinds, as opposed to captured humans. The crowd was behaving weirdly, too. After his experience in the Dreamscape, Sunny expected to see the spectators overwhelmed by bloodthirst and dark, cruel fascination.

Instead, these people seemed to be joyful and proud, almost solemn. It was as though they were genuinely happy for the gladiators, even a little bit… jealous? The crowd was undulating and shifting, singing one word over and over again:

"Glory! Glory! Glory!"

Their voices merged into an echoing, thunderous roar.

'What the hell is wrong with these bastards…'

Sadly, Sunny didn't have a lot of time to think about the weirdness of the audience. He had bigger problems on his plate.

Right in front of him, another creature was let go of the chain, its powerful body covered in dirty brown fur. Four mighty paws, a long

muzzle with terrifying fangs, and six eyes burning with madness… it was very similar to the Dread Wolves he had fought at the island covered by strange, twisted trees.

And it wasn't alone.

Two more beasts appeared from behind the first one, falling low to the ground as guttural growls escaped from their maws.

'Damnation!'

Sunny shifted his gaze, trying to discern the Rank and Class of the murderous beasts. They seemed a lot smaller than the Fallen Monster he had killed before, at least — simply the size of a bull instead of a full cargo vehicle. His newfound ability to peer into the souls of living things and see their soul cores was going to come in handy...

However, what he saw beneath their tough hides left him confused. Instead of spheres of radiant light, the creatures had hideous masses of swirling darkness at the center of their beings, veins of it spreading throughout their souls like cancerous growths. In the depths of that darkness, something unclear seemed to be moving, as if trying to break free.

The sight of it was both frightening and repulsive.

It reminded him, somewhat, of the harrowing rot he had witnessed in the Ebony Tower, growing from the severed arm of Weaver.

'...So this is what soul cores of Nightmare Creatures look like.'

Sunny had no idea how to judge the Rank of such cores, since he only knew to measure the usual ones by their size and luminosity. The growths of darkness in the dread wolves seemed to have two swirling nodes each, which at least told him that they were mere monsters.

Not that it helped him very much.

How was he supposed to fight against three monsters while barely being able to stand upright in this new, unfamiliar body?

'Curse it!'

…He was also not at all happy with the fact that this gaunt and powerful body was standing more than two meters tall, devoid of any fat... and stark naked, with all his stuff hanging loose for everyone to see.

Or bite off!

Plus, there were a lot of women in the crowd...

Hiding his discomfort, Sunny stared at the wolves, his black eyes full of menacing resentment. His lips parted, revealing sharp fangs that were in no way inferior to that of the monstrous beasts. A low growl escaped from his mouth.

'Come on… look how big and scary I am! You wouldn't want to fight a scary demon like me, would you? One would have to be insane to attack such a monstrosity…'

Sadly, this was exactly what Nightmare Creatures were. Insane…

The wolves lunged forward, madness burning in their bloodshot eyes. Their maws opened, foam glistening on jagged fangs. The crowd roared.

'Damn it all!'

Sunny commanded the shadows to wrap themselves around his body, which suddenly turned black and lusterless, as though cut from obsidian. Thankfully, at least that part of his Aspect still worked… almost instantly, his might quadrupled, and so did his speed.

He dashed through the darkness and appeared from the shadow of one of the wolves, his four hands shooting forward to grab the beast, sharp claws sinking into the soft flesh. Sunny was still struggling to control his body, and for that reason, his movements were much slower and messier than they could have been.

But, embraced by the three shadows, he simply used brute power to overcome that disadvantage.

Raising the massive monster above his head, he hissed and pulled with all his might. Lean muscles moved like steel cables under his

onyx skin, and in the next moment, a river of blood flowed onto his horned head from above as the body of the wolf was mercilessly torn apart.

The crowd went wild, their voices growing loud and triumphant — at least of those spectators who were close to his enclosed box.

'What… what are you screaming for, idiots…'

Sunny was more than a little startled by the violent strength of his new body. It was much more powerful than his human one… however, it was also much taller, and his center of gravity was much further from the ground.

For that reason, Sunny miscalculated his posture completely, lost his balance, and toppled over as soon as the dread wolf's body lost its integrity.

He crashed onto the bloodied stones, instinctively raising two of his four hands to cover his throat. Almost instantly, one of the remaining two monsters was upon him, its maw opening wide before closing around his neck like a crushing bear trap.

Luckily, Sunny's arms were already in the way, so instead of tearing his throat open, the wolf only managed to bite into them, sharp fangs burrowing through tough skin, piercing flesh, and scraping against bone.

Overwhelmed by the explosion of terrible pain and the sudden fall, Sunny momentarily forgot how to control his limbs and operate the shadow demon's body. The second wolf jumped on him, tearing his abdomen with long claws.

'Argh!'

Not good… this was not good! He was pinned to the ground, defenseless, seconds away from being disemboweled and having his head torn off. And he couldn't even remember how many hands he had, and what to do with them…

Sunny shuddered, then opened his mouth and roared. His bestial scream washed over the wolves, momentarily stunning them.

Then, he moved his two upper hands, grasping the first wolf by the jaws, and simultaneously threw his lower arms around the second one. Twisting his body, Sunny threw the monster digging into his abdomen off and pinned it to the stones, at the same time pushing the maw away from his neck.

Growling menacingly, he pulled the jaws of one of the monsters apart, while crushing the other in a devastating embrace.

The three of them struggled furiously for a few moments, more and more gashes and lacerations accumulating on Sunny's body. The pain flooded his mind, clearing it of all unnecessary thoughts.

All that remained was a cold and murderous will to kill.

He strained the muscles of his demonic body to the limit, and finally felt the spine of one of the wolves snap in his embrace, and at the same time, the lower jaw of the other one separate from its skull.

A pitiful wail assaulted his ears, and he threw the paralyzed monster away, ripping the other's jaw off entirely.

Both wolves fell to the ground, while Sunny was finally able to rise. His fists came down like sledgehammers, crushing the skulls of the abominations into paste.

The massive bodies of the Nightmare Creatures shuddered, and then grew still.

Sunny was left kneeling, his chest rising and falling heavily. His naked body was covered in deep lacerations and blood, most of it not his own. His eyes were as black as the bottomless abyss of the Sky Below, and his four hands hung low, claws marred with strands of brown fur, bone dust, and disgusting greyish-red sludge.

The crowd cheered loudly, more spectators starting to pay attention to his box with disturbingly joyful and sincerely pleased expressions on their faces.

Sunny sucked in the air into his four lungs, his two hearts beating wildly, and slowly rose to his feet. He scowled, painfully aware of the absence of the familiar voice announcing his kills. The Spell was

silent.

'...Now what?'

As though to answer his question, a rattling of chains resounded from somewhere up ahead.

And then, the rusty iron gate in the front fence of the box rose, opening a path to a new one, this one closer to the center of the arena and permeated with the smell of death even more.

Sunny stared at the newly opened path with a bleak expression, then let out a low growl and walked toward it, now acquainted with his towering body a little bit better.

'Damned Solvane... that witch! I am going to kill her… kill her again, I mean. Anyway, she's going to answer for everything before the Nightmare is over... this, I promise before the gods!'

Radiating a menacing aura of anger and resentment, Sunny passed beneath the rusted gates and entered the second box.

# Chapter-605: Hideous Demon

As Sunny was walking toward the next enclosure, he had a few seconds to think.

The first thing he realized was that, despite the fact that the Spell remained silent, he had in fact received the shadow fragments from the three dread wolves. The feeling of his cores, and thus body, growing a tiny bit stronger was there, even though it was hard to sense the minuscule change in all the chaos.

'Strange… this is all so strange…'

His connection to the Spell seemed to be gone, cut by the steel collar on his neck, and yet not all of his powers disappeared. Sunny couldn't access his Soul Sea and summon Memories or runes, but he still possessed the ability to absorb fragments. He was also able to command his shadows to augment his body, as well as use Shadow Step...

even though its range seemed to be limited by the walls of the arena.

What did it all mean?

Well… from the look of it, while the Spell was gone, his Aspect remained. There was a lot of meaning hidden in this simple fact, but Sunny had no time to unpack it.

What else was his Aspect capable of?

Walking under the rusty gate, Sunny hesitated for a split second, and then summoned the Soul Serpent.

A moment later, almost unnoticeable on his obsidian skin, an intricate tattoo of a coiling serpent appeared, wrapped around his arms and torso. When Sunny sent shadow essence coursing through

it, the coils shone with dark radiance, revealing themselves for everyone to see.

His lips moved, revealing powerful fangs in a frightening grin.

'So you are here as well, buddy…'

What did it mean? It meant that Sunny didn't have to fight unarmed anymore. It also meant that Saint was with him, as well.

He might not have been the most deadly of creatures at the moment, still unaccustomed to this new lumbering body. But the two of them?

Together, Sunny and Saint were a duo most fearsome.

Full of new confidence, he entered the second killing box, sending his shadow sense forward to encompass it.

What he saw there made him squint a little.

…There was already a battle going on in the enclosure, a pair of humans desperately trying to fight off a swarm of small, swift lizard-like creatures. Both of them wore white tunics, the younger one unarmed, while the older one had a simple sword in his hands and a leather cuirass protecting his torso.

There were several human corpses laying on the ground, terribly disfigured by the sharp claws and triangular fangs of the abominations, with their once-white clothes soaked in blood.

Sunny shifted his gaze and saw the vile darkness spreading through the souls of the lizard-like gremlins. From the look of it, they were all Awakened, the same as the wolves he had fought — Sunny measured the strength of the monsters during the battle and judged their Rank to be the same as his.

The younger man was an Awakened, as well, with a single radiant soul core, while the older one had none at all. He was a mundane human.

As Sunny watched, the older warrior was finally overwhelmed and fell to the ground, the gremlins easily tearing through his cuirass and

sinking their claws and teeth into the soft flesh beneath.

The young man screamed and dashed to help him, but it was already too late. Even though the Awakened youth managed to kill several beasts with his fists and pushed the others away, his partner was already mortally wounded. He shuddered, a river of blood flowing from a ghastly gash in his neck, and weakly pushed the hilt of the sword into the younger man's hands.

The crowd went wild, happily chanting the same damned word…

"Glory! Glory! Glory!"

The last surviving human raised his head, pain and sorrow mixing with hatred in his light blue eyes.

He didn't get to dwell on his loss for long, though, because the remaining gremlins were already rushing to tear him apart.

…Some, however, found a new target.

Sunny grunted and tried to control his body as precisely as possible. He didn't command the Soul Serpent to assume the form of a weapon or summon Saint yet, preferring to keep his cards hidden, for now.

The lizard-like abominations did not seem too dangerous, anyway. At least not with their remaining numbers and their attention split between two targets.

'Curses…'

The four-armed demon's gaunt body was too tall, heavy, and unwieldy. Every motion required more effort, and was slower than he was used to. Even though there was inhuman strength in the shadow creature's steel muscles, which was supposed to translate into explosive speed, dragging so much mass around was still different from operating a small and slim human body he had possessed before.

'Who would have thought that I would miss being short one day?'

Four gremlins jumped at Sunny at the same time, more of them

lagging a second behind. Their narrow eyes shone with rabid bloodlust, and their jagged claws were aimed at his flesh, lusting to rip it apart.

Wrapped in shadows, with the coils of the Soul Serpent shining darkly on his skin, Sunny took a step forward and caught all four creatures from the air, then slammed their skulls against each other, crushing them.

Even though he was having trouble controlling his new body, how could these beasts ever hope to survive a battle against a demon?

And a very special one, at that…

Sunny bared his teeth and lunged forward, a low growl escaping from his mouth. His four arms moved, crushing flesh and bone. Several beasts managed to slip past his assault and sink their claws into his thighs, one even trying to bite off a big chunk of flesh.

Sunny hissed from pain and crouched, using his claws to rip four more gremlins apart. There was no free hand to finish off the last one, so he simply bit off its arm with his sharp fangs, feeling the bone crunch and the disgusting taste of corrupted blood on his tongue.

'Argh! I'm going to vomit!'

Sunny spit a mouthful of fetid, dark blood and silenced the shrieking creature with a bone-shattering backhand slap.

Suddenly, the box became deathly silent.

He groaned, overwhelmed by pain for a moment. The damned abominations had died rather easily, but not before doing a lot of damage. He might have overestimated his newfound prowess... or underestimated the gremlins due to their small stature and frail frames.

The irony...

Sunny gritted his teeth, this time careful not to pierce his own lips by doing so, then wiped his face and straightened. Finally, he glanced in the direction of the remaining group of abominations. To his surprise,

they were already dead — the young Awakened had slaughtered them with the sword, somehow, and was now standing there motionlessly, frozen stiff by fear.

…The youth was staring at him with a pale face, eyes wide with terror.

Then, he took an unsteady step back and whispered:

"Oh… oh gods! Lord, protect me against the hideous demons of the night!"

Sunny looked down at him from his immense height, his cobalt black body covered in terrible wounds and blood, more streaming from between his sharp fangs.

He suppressed the desire to roll his eyes.

'Hideous? Rude…'

# Chapter-606: Fate of a Slave

Sunny glanced down at the young man, then slowly moved toward him. The Awakened shuddered and took another involuntary step back, then gritted his teeth and lowered his stance, raising the sword into a proper defense position.

"Lord, shine thine light upon me! Let my s—soul burn unextinguished, as the sun can never be extinguished…"

'Huh… I've seen suns fade away and disappear before. Never say never, fool…'

Sunny listened to the strange prayer and allowed one of his shadows to slide off his menacing body, flowing to the ground like a dark veil. After that, he hissed from pain and stopped near a mangled human corpse.

He stared at the trembling youth for a few moments, and then bent down, stretching his hands toward the body.

The young man flinched and fell silent, then shouted:

"Get your vile hands away from him, demon!"

Sunny ignored the Awakened and used his claws to rip the white tunic off the corpse. Then, he straightened and glanced at it with displeasure, his black eyes narrowing.

This one was not too dirtied by blood, but sadly, its previous owner was of a normal size for a human. As such, the tunic was way too small for Sunny's new towering body. He snarled, and then tried to tie the tunic around his waist like a makeshift loincloth.

There was a big problem, though… his tail.

Sunny froze, somewhat confused about what to do. Then, he awkwardly tore a hole in the tunic and made another attempt, this one, thankfully, successful.

With his nakedness finally covered, he instantly felt better and turned his attention back to the trembling youth.

The young man was staring at him with wide eyes, periodically glancing at the unceremoniously disrobed corpse at his feet. Finally, he opened his mouth:

"You… you barbarous beast! Have you no shame?!"

Sunny grinned, revealing two rows of sharp fangs and four long, terrifying canines.

In the next moment, though, his smile dimmed, because there was suddenly a familiar pressure rising in his mind.

So, his Flaw remained, as well…

'Damn it.'

He hesitated, then slowly shook his head. Instantly, the pressure disappeared.

'Figures. I can't escape the damned curse even if when I'm mute… how is this even fair?'

The Awakened blinked.

"No… of course not, why would a demon know shame… it's… wait! You... you can understand me?"

With the Spell gone, its magical ability to translate any language in the Nightmare was gone, too. However, Sunny found himself able to discern what the young man was saying, as well as the only word the spectators seemed to know, even if it demanded some effort.

The language they spoke was not exactly the same as the ones he had learned before, first in the Academy and later during his travels in the Dream Realm, but similar enough to make out some of the words.

He was able to deduce the rest.

Sunny stared at the youth from above, then nodded darkly.

The young man blinked.

"Wait… you are not one of the Corrupted, then? What kind of a creature are you?"

Sunny scowled. The word meant something that was tainted, infected, changed, and perverted… a being cursed with some form of corruption. But what exactly was the Awakened asking? Was he referring to the Nightmare Creatures, perhaps?

He hesitated, then shook his head again, and pointed to the coils of the Soul Serpent glistening on his skin.

The youth frowned, confused.

"A snake… a serpent? Can that demon be Shadow's kin? No wonder the Warriors hunted him down, then… their God and Shadow are old enemies…"

'Uh… is he talking to me? Or to himself?'

Sunny lingered for a moment, then took a step forward. The Awakened flinched, torn away from his pondering, and raised his sword higher.

"Stay away, demon, or I will…"

He felt silent when the gaunt, towering monstrosity walked past him with absolute indifference.

Sunny wasn't going to fight the youth… unless the fool chose to attack first, of course. Made into a gladiator or not, he was not going to play the part of an obedient slave. He had no qualms with killing humans, but not to satisfy anyone's thirst for entertainment, especially not of anyone wishing to be his owner.

They would have to come down in person if they wanted to force him…

He studied the dead humans. Men, women, young and old… the only thing in common they had was the color of their white garments. Some had been unarmed, and some had wielded weapons. The weapons were what he was really interested in…

There was a couple laying on the red stones, none of them bearing any enchantments. He picked up a battle axe, glanced at it, and then threw it back to the ground. What was the point of having a mundane weapon? His claws were sharper and far more devastating.

…Luckily, the young man seemed to have decided against using the sword against him, too. He just stood there, staring at the corpses, a dark and inconsolable expression on his face.

The steward of the arena, whoever that was, did not seem to want them to kill each other, as well.

With a sound of scraping metal, another rusty gate rose, opening the path to the third box, this one even closer to the center of the coliseum.

Sunny and the young Awakened glanced at each other warily…

And then walked toward the gate together.

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Sunny's next cage was larger and more comfortable… well, he at least could stand up straight in it.

Not that he was in any mood to do so.

In the end, he had been forced to fight his way through seven killing boxes, the last circular one at the very heart of the coliseum. In each box, a new Nightmare Creature, or a group of them, awaited — those abominations who had prevailed in their own battles at the outer circles of the arena.

In this way, only the strongest and the most ferocious of the enslaved creatures had a chance to reach the center. The further they went, the louder the cheers of the spectators became.

And on the final stage, their salvation awaited.

Kill the final enemy, and get the chance to live another day… only to be forced to go through this meat grinder again, undoubtedly. Collecting more wounds, more kills…

More glory.

Sunny had received a lot of injuries, as for the glory, he wasn't so sure.

Currently, he was sprawled on the bottom of a hanging cage, his body a map of gashes, lacerations, and bruises. Everything hurt, but at least he wasn't bleeding… that was the benefit of losing his chance to receive Shadow God's lineage.

He was slowly healing.

In the cage next to him, the Awakened with light blue eyes sat, an empty and hollow expression on his smooth, youthful face. The young man had somehow managed to survive, as well, but grew quiet and despondent after they were brought back to the dungeon.

Sunny didn't blame him.

He was a bit desperate, too.

Yes, they had survived today… but just barely.

And who knew how many such days there were going to be, in the future?

Somehow, he had a disturbing feeling that once someone had entered the arena… they never left it alive.

Sunny closed his eyes, exhausted.

So what if his fate was to die as a slave in this cursed coliseum… fate was not something immutable.

It was just very, very hard to change.

Was he or was he not the heir to the Demon of Fate?

If anyone could do it, it was him...

# Chapter-607: Shifting Sand

Caged in the darkness, Sunny had a lot of time to think. All around him, a horde of Nightmare Creatures waited for their turn to be slaughtered in the bloodsoaked arena, a few unfortunate human slaves among them. Here in the nightmarish dungeon, both abominations and people were the same, equal in the face of inevitable death.

His thoughts returned to the very start of the trial, to the announcement the Spell made. Five brave ones… someone else had entered the Nightmare with them, and Sunny had a good idea who.

Mordret… the Prince of Nothing still lived, against all odds, and had found a way to reach his goal. Perhaps his reflection had hidden in the eyes of Saint Cormac, and then slid unnoticed into either Effie's or Kai's.

Was one of his friends dead?

No… no, that didn't make sense. If Mordret had devoured one of the souls aboard the ancient flying ship, then someone would have noticed. The Fire Keepers were a close group, and knew each other too well to miss a sudden change in the demeanor of one of them.

As for Effie and Kai, if they had fallen victim to Mordret's terrifying Ability, then there would have been only four souls entering the Nightmare.

But who was to say that the Prince of Nothing had to invade a soul once his reflection jumped into the person's eyes? Maybe he could just hide in the reflections, biding his time and waiting for an opportunity to find a better vessel.

And speaking of vessels…

Sunny studied his monstrous body, his black eyes full of a somber apprehension.

Why had he been sent into a body of a demon? The Spell was supposed to find suitable vessels for the challengers… had he been made into a hideous abomination because of his three shadow cores? After all, it was hard to find a human with a soul worthy of a Divine Aspect.

If so… was Mordret in the body of a Terror right now?

Hidden in the darkness, Sunny shivered.

Yes, this was most likely the case. This fact had the potential to either reveal itself to be a blessing, or a curse.

In theory, all five of them had the same goal — to resolve the conflict of the Nightmare and Ascend. So, having a Terror fight on their side would be a boon, no matter how much resentment Sunny had for the bastard. He also suspected that Mordret wielded the ivory knife, increasing their chances of success even further.

But Sunny also remembered what Master Jet had told them… not all of the Awakened trying to conquer the trial of the Spell had to pursue the same goal. Sometimes, their solutions and ideals clashed, making them enemies.

The idea of having Mordret as an enemy in this already insurmountable hell scared him. The Prince of Nothing… was maybe the most dangerous opponent he had ever faced.

Would Mordret turn on the other four humans that had entered the Seed? It was impossible to tell. He was not cruel for the sake of cruelty, and was not nearly as insane as everyone seemed to think. His hatred was directed toward Valor, and not them. But at the same time, Sunny could not say that the banished prince was completely of sound mind.

Something about him… when Sunny looked Mordret in the eyes, it felt as though something was missing in them. It was a very small difference, but one that made facing the Prince of Nothing strangely

unsettling.

Mordret was a wild card, one whose actions Sunny simply could not predict.

'...No point in dwelling on it right now. Unless I find a way to escape this morbid place alive, all that awaits me is death, anyway.'

He shifted and hissed slightly as pain radiated through his body, originating from countless wounds.

Sunny thought back to his battle in the arena.

Strange… it was all so strange.

Some of his powers were gone, but others remained. His Aspect seemed to be unaffected, but his connection to the Spell was gone.

Then, did this mean… did this mean that an Aspect was not a part of the Spell, but instead existed outside of it?

Trapped in an unbreakable enchanted cage, Sunny scowled.

A long, long time ago… back when he had passed the First Nightmare and received his Aspect… it had felt as though the power was coming from somewhere deep within him, as opposed to from an external source.

Was the Spell only awakening inherent powers that were locked inside human souls, and not creating them?

'Wait a minute…'

Come to think of it… Auro of the Nine had claimed to be an Awakened, and while the youth sitting silently in the nearby cage had not said it, he was an Awakened, too. But in this ancient past, the gods were still alive, and so were the daemons.

Their terrible war had not started yet, and Weaver had not disappeared to create something that would spell doom for both the six gods and the six daemons… to create the Nightmare Spell.

If Sunny's suspicions were correct, of course. That meant the Nightmare Spell had not even existed yet, in this era.

But Awakened did.

As well as Nightmare Creatures… or the Corrupted, as the youth had called them.

Sunny's vertical pupils narrowed.

Were the Nightmare Creatures… not created by the Nightmare Spell, as well?

'What the hell…'

The very idea seemed strange and ridiculous. The Spell had appeared in the waking world, causing the first Nightmare Creatures to be made from the bodies of those infected by it, and for the first generation of the Awakened to be born.

It summoned those Awakened into the Dream Realm, which was populated by the abominations, and pushed them toward seeking out and challenging the Seeds of Nightmares. Unless a Seed was conquered, it eventually opened a path for more monsters to enter reality.

The very idea of Nightmare Creatures, Aspects, and Awakened was inseparable from the Spell.

And yet… somehow, it was?

'What... what does it all mean?'

Sunny ground his fangs, overwhelmed by a myriad of thoughts, and a lot of confusion. It seemed as though the very foundation of his worldview had suddenly turned out to be built on shifting sand…

He closed his eyes and scowled, feeling a dull headache approaching, then raised two hands and rubbed his face, careful not to slice it open with the claws.

Suddenly, the cage next to his swayed. The young Awakened stood

up and grabbed the bars, staring into the darkness.

A few moments later, he said hoarsely:

"Demon… hey, demon. Wake up. They're coming!"

# Chapter-608: Reincarnated as a Demonic Gladiator in a Magical World

"Glory! Glory! Glory!"

Sunny growled, falling to the ground, the heavy body of a stone gargoyle pressing him down, its claws buried in his chest. A dark radiance rose from his skin, the scales of a coiling serpent becoming more visible, and then, one of the forearms of the abomination shattered, pulled apart by his hands.

The creature roared, its tail shooting forward like a spear. He had no time to dodge or deflect the blow, so instead, Sunny simply endured the blinding pain of the stone spike piercing his shoulder, and pushed with his feet, straining to jump up.

As the result, his horns struck the gargoyle in the chin, impaling it through the skull.

Something cold streamed down his face, and, momentarily blinded, Sunny struck the abomination in the chest with all his might, sending the stone goliath flying back.

The gargoyle exploded into a rain of stone shards when its body struck the floor of the arena.

Sunny breathed heavily, his torso a mess of torn flesh, and then tiredly searched for the remaining enemy, which was supposed to be fighting the Awakened youth… if he was still alive.

His second day in the coliseum had been both easier and more harrowing than the first.

It was easier because Sunny was slowly growing accustomed to his new inhuman body. For someone else, this process might have taken longer, but he had always put adaptability and control of his physicality first.

Both the flowing battle style Nephis had taught him and Shadow Dance were meant to make the practitioner as flexible and versatile as possible, the latter especially being the pinnacle of malleability.

So, he had plenty of practice to prepare himself for waking up in the body of an actual demon, ironically. Who would have thought?

…But this day's battles were also much more lethal. At first, Sunny had thought that his luck was just this bad, but after he and the young Awakened had barely survived the first two boxes, the youth shared a bit of knowledge that put everything into perspective.

Apparently, by surviving the previous day's slaughter and making their way to the center of the arena, the two of them earned the privilege of being added to the main herd of gladiators. In other words, everyone — and every thing — they faced today had won seven consecutive fights in the past, as well.

This was the creme of the crop of the enslaved combatants, more or less.

And the final stage was also going to be different…

'Damnation…'

He sensed two swift shadows some distance away, then finally saw them. His eyesight wasn't the best in daylight, so Sunny relied on shadow sense more and more…

The kid was still alive, wielding a simple sword and a rusty shield that he had picked up in their second fight. He was dancing around the gargoyle, showing a good grasp of combat technique and more than a little bit of talent.

The young man was inexperienced, but incredibly talented. His battle prowess was perhaps on par with what Sunny himself had shown on the Forgotten Shore. Or even greater.

…Not that it was going to help the youth. What was the point of knowing how to wield a sword, when that sword had no chance of piercing the enemy's stone skin?

"D—demon! I can't hold it off much longer!"

Sunny sighed, then stepped through the shadows, appearing behind the gargoyle in a whirlwind of claws. With a loud roar, he crashed into the towering creature and caught it in a deadly embrace. The steel cables of his muscles moved under the obsidian skin, and with a low growl, Sunny lifted the heavy abomination into the air.

'Gods… is this how much Saint weighs?'

Even for his demonic body, the burden of a monster of similar proportions, made entirely out of stone, was almost too much.

Almost…

Without stopping his lunge, Sunny carried the gargoyle forward like a speeding train, and smashed the creature against the spikes mounted on the wall, impaling it on them.

The crowd roared, expressing their joy and admiration of his brutality.

Sunny watched as mad light was extinguished in the eyes of the abomination, then took a step back and fell heavily to one knee.

'Can… can you shut up for a moment… you bastards…'

Today, he hated the spectators even more than he had yesterday.

The Awakened youth was already beside him, staring at the dead gargoyle with a dark expression. Then, he glanced at his sword, and finally at the four-armed monstrosity near him.

"Demon, you… you don't look too well."

Sunny looked at him with his black eyes, no recognizable human expression on his strange, bestial face.

'No way, you noticed? Damn, what a fool…'

Sunny, indeed, did not look too well. In fact, he looked terrible, with his obsidian skin torn in many places and sliced muscle tissue visible beneath. The most disturbing thing about it was the fact that his mangled flesh was awash with crimson blood, but none of it flowed out of the wounds, as if possessing a will of its own.

He had not fared as well as he had thought he would in the battle against the gargoyles, in large part because the monsters had turned out to be much more powerful and swift than the similar creatures he had fought before… in the future.

Although Sunny was reluctant to do so, he suspected that he would have to reveal at least one of his two hidden cards — the Soul Serpent or Saint — before too long.

The youth hesitated for a few moments, then suddenly stepped forward and put his hand on Sunny's torn chest.

Sunny hissed, shocked by the unexpected gesture.

"Don't move, demon… I'm trying to help you…"

'What the hell…'

Suddenly, the young man's light blue eyes shone with cerulean light, and his curly blond hair moved, as if brushed by an otherworldly wind.

A warm sensation spread from his palm into Sunny's aching body. Slowly, the pain receded, and at the same time, the torn fibers of his flesh started to repair themselves, growing back together.

In a dozen seconds or so, miraculously, the terrible wounds on his body had almost closed. The young man, however, paled considerably and stepped back, his breathing fast and rugged. It seemed as though his soul essence was largely drained.

'Well, I'll be damned…'

The fool... was a healer.

Sunny couldn't know whether to laugh or cry. On one hand, Awakened healers were incredibly rare, and having one as his only ally was of tremendous benefit.

On the other hand, his only ally in the battle arena also turned out to possess an Aspect that was absolutely useless in a fight… so there was that, as well.

The iron gates rattled, opening the path to the next killing box.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, and then rose to his feet.

'No, this is good… I can kill anything the slavers throw at us. He just has to keep me alive.'

He glanced at the pale youth, then nodded curtly and headed toward the gates.

Before walking through them, however, he stopped and tore off the long tip of the dead gargoyle's tail, then handed it to the young man.

The stone spike of an Awakened Nightmare Creature was bound to perform better than a mundane weapon, at least.

The Awakened stared at him for a bit, then sighed and dropped the sword onto the ground.

They walked through the gate, and Sunny's face instantly darkened.

'I know that smell…'

The Chain Worm he had seen before in the dungeon was already crawling through the other gate, its terrifying maw dripping with black blood.

The crowd began its chant again, ecstatic to see the Fallen Demon advance to the next box.

"Glory! Glory!"

He sighed, full of dread and hatred.

'Alright. Alright, bastards. I'll show you glory…'

# Chapter-609: Glory

Sunny tore the Chain Worm apart, pieces of flesh and puddles of blood covering the red stones of the arena like a ghastly carpet. Then, shrouded in impenetrable shadows, he thrust his hands into the mangled carcass of the slain abomination and ripped three bloody soul shards out.

…Ironically, killing the Fallen Demon had not been too hard for him. A long time ago, Master Roan had described these vile creatures as incredibly formidable and deadly opponents, someone that even he would not have wanted to face alone. But that was because Master Roan was a human.

Chain Worms fed on metal, and as such, steel weapons and armor were useless against them. Sunny would have been in trouble if he was still in his human body, and most of his arsenal of Memories suddenly became ineffective. However, he was a demon now — one of the shadowspawn, or Shadow's kin, or whatever it was he had been turned into.

His claws, his fangs, and his shadows were the perfect weapon to destroy such abominations.

Of course, fighting against a creature one Rank higher than him was not easy. But, augmented by three shadows, he had managed to dismantle the massive abomination without too much trouble. In fact, killing the Chain Warm had been much easier than killing Master Pierce. He wasn't even wounded, at least not seriously.

The crowd grew silent, shocked by his display of ruthless brutality, and then exploded with cheers. Glory, glory… it seemed that they enjoyed seeing someone triumph against a stronger opponent much more than anything else.

'Crazy bastards…'

Sunny glanced at the spectators with resentment, then walked over to the young Awakened and pushed the soul shards into his hands. The youth looked at them with a frown.

"These… are these soul shards?"

'Gods. How can he be an Awakened and not know what a shard looks like?'

Sunny stared at the young man darkly, then nodded and raised one hand to his chest, making a fist.

The Awakened hesitated:

"Don't you want to consume them yourself?"

Sunny snarled, then shook his head. Finally convinced, the youth crushed the shards in his fists and froze, a funny expression appearing on his face.

"Wh... what a strange feeling…"

'...Whatever.'

Sunny wasn't giving the shards away out of altruism. For better or worse, the young man was now his partner. The stronger he became, the better he would be able to aid Sunny, both in battle and while using his healing Aspect.

And Sunny was going to need a lot of healing. That, he was sure of.

After that was done, they proceeded to the fifth cage, and then to the sixth. And finally, to the last.

By that point, Sunny was nearing his limit.

Both battles after the Chain Worm had tested him in ways he had not expected, draining him of essence, damaging his body, and putting a heavy strain on his endurance. He was exhausted and overwhelmed by pain, the merciless sun shining blindingly in the blue skies and making his black eyes ache.

At least the Crushing seemed to ignore the island where the colosseum was located. In fact, Sunny had not felt the island move either up or down even once. Perhaps it had a permanent altitude, like the Sanctuary of Noctis.

The seventh battle… the last one they had to survive today… was, indeed, different.

The central stage of the arena was circular in shape, with six gates in its walls. Four were already opened, and two still stood closed.

Corpses of several terrifying creatures were laying on the red stones, steam rising from the pools of blood surrounding them. And in the middle of the killing stage, two humans stood, their faces hidden behind the helmet visors.

Both were tall, strong, and clad in archaic armor. Their garments were painted bright red, and so were the plumes of their helmets. One was armed with a spear and a shield, while the other wielded an axe and a sword.

These were worshippers of War God, just like the spectators singing from the stone seats of the great amphitheater.

The young man shivered:

"Warmongers… these mad dogs…"

Sunny tilted his head, paying no attention to the raging crowd as he studied the two humans. Both were Awakened, and from the look of it, of sufficient power and skill. They were calm and solemn, their eyes empty of even a hint of fear, and instead full of confidence and savage joy.

…Glory. That was what all of them were here for, willingly or not. The masters of the arena wanted their slaves to fight for it, but they also wanted to achieve it themselves. After the initial culling had taken place, the final obstacle the gladiators had to overcome each day was to kill some of their slavers.

And the slavers had to survive the onslaught of the slaves, if they wished to live.

In fact, all of the battles in the arena served a singular purpose — to deliver the best and the most formidable opponents for the worshippers of War to temper themselves against, or die trying.

'Mad dogs, indeed.'

All these people were insane. Sunny was now more sure of it than ever.

It didn't change anything, though. He still had to kill the two Awakened warriors, if he wanted to survive. Or rather, if he wanted to earn the chance to be killed in the arena some other day.

With a low growl, Sunny sent one of the shadows to the ground. In this fight, being aware of his surroundings was going to be more important than raw strength. No Awakened human could challenge him in terms of raw might, after all… unless their Aspect was solely focused on it.

But such an Aspect was the least dangerous an enemy of his could possess. It was easy to understand and predictable, at least.

It was the versatility and unpredictable nature of Aspects that made Awakened so dangerous…

Without much fanfare, the four of them lunged at each other, an almost palpable killing intent permeating the arena.

The two warriors fought with tremendous skill and combat prowess. The two warriors fought bravely and furiously, moving like two parts of a single organism.

The two warriors fought with incredible insight and cunning, both wielding clarity like a deadly weapon. Truly, they were worthy of being the followers of War.

…But in the end, both of them died.

How could they resist a creature that could turn their skill against them, who had faced terrors so vast that most humans would have been driven mad by a mere glimpse of them, and who lived his life wearing countless lies like a mantle?

Sunny watched as the corpse of the second human fell to the ground, awash in blood, light dimming in his unbelieving eyes, and sighed.

'Here's your glory, poor fools… how does it taste? Is it sweet? Is it bitter? Or does it taste like nothing at all, like the empty lie that it is?'

Turning away from the dead men, he glanced at the crowd, expecting to finally see sorrow and displeasure on the faces of the spectators.

He had just killed two of their own, after all.

But his hopes were instantly crushed.

The people gathered in the amphitheater were not at all perturbed by the death of their brethren. Instead, they were even more excited, pride and joy gleaming on their faces.

Laughing and smiling, they pointed at him and yelled one word, over and over.

Only this time, it was a new one.

All of them were shouting:

...Shadow!

# Chapter-610: Mind of a Beast

"Shadow! Shadow! Shadow!"

…Sunny swayed, looking at the broken sword in his hand. When did it break? He didn't quite remember. This was one of the first weapons he had picked up in the arena, right after killing… wait, who had he killed for that sword?

Dead faces spun in his mind, staring at him with empty eyes. There were so many that he couldn't even tell whether all of them had once belonged to real enemies or were simply created by his imagination. No, that one was real… the first human he had killed in the coliseum. That had been the battle where he took the sword.

These days, he was having trouble remembering things.

Sunny threw the broken sword away and looked at the crowd that was chanting his name. Shadow… right! That was him.

'What is wrong with you, fool… since when was that your name?'

He growled, wishing that he had thrown the broken weapon at one of the humans. Not that it would have done any good — there were powerful enchantments permeating the ancient stones of the coliseum. Some of them were meant to prevent the fighters from escaping, others protected the audience from their ire. Some, he had no idea about.

All his attempts to break free of this cursed place had failed… for now.

"Demon… are you alright?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then glanced at Elyas, slowly returning from the bizarre state of mind the battle had sent him into.

The young man was looking at him with a strange expression on his face, a bit of apprehension hiding deep in his light blue eyes.

The youth had grown considerably stronger in the weeks they had spent fighting all kinds of monsters — both of the Nightmare and human kind — in the arena. All those soul shards had not been wasted on him. His healing Ability was now much more potent, and his skill as a warrior blossomed. His face also changed, becoming gaunt and angular... almost mature.

One had no choice but to grow up quickly in hell...

The pain of the Flaw washed over Sunny, finally shattering his strange trance. He gritted his teeth, and nodded.

"Well… good. You are being weird recently, you know. I have some essence left, so let me heal you before they take us back to the cages."

Sunny allowed the youth to approach and activate his Aspect Ability, staring at the Warmonger they had just killed. This one was a bit of a challenge… the bastard had almost taken one of his arms off.

The slavers they fought were growing stronger lately.

'Something is wrong.'

Sunny was not thinking about the Warmongers. He was thinking about his own state. At the start of all this, he had been in very bad shape… day after day, he had fought in the arena, receiving terrible wounds and being beaten down, time after time, just to claw his way to survival, somehow, and be thrown back into the cage.

At first, he had kept his spirits high despite all the horror of his situation. He kept thinking and studying his surrounding, searching for a way to escape. He still had hope.

But after a while, when nothing had worked, the weight of pain, torment, and hopelessness had grown heavier and heavier, and then heavier still. A seed of despair had taken root in his soul. And once there, it grew uncontrollably, threatening to break him into pieces.

…Sunny had not broken. But he had to search for a way to survive in

the arena without losing pieces of his flesh each time, to bide his time until an opportunity to escape presented itself.

He had found that way in Shadow Dance.

The idea had been kept in the depths of his mind for a long time, but only now, faced with this soul-crushing despair, had Sunny summoned it into the light. He had decided to try and expand the purview of his battle style to include not only shadowing humans, but also Nightmare Creatures.

The result... was a resounding success.

Armed with a demon's body, Sunny had found it surprisingly easy to peer into the very essence of how the mad abominations carried themselves in battle, how they used their monstrous bodies and vile abilities to tear, ravage, and obliterate everything in their path. And then, he had stolen it.

He had claws, too. He had fangs and horns, too. He had plenty of hatred and cruelty burning in his heart, too.

…Not that having a demon's body mattered, in the end. It was the willingness to shift the way he thought that was needed.

Why couldn't he learn how to ravage, rip apart, and obliterate from these creatures?

He had done exactly that, and slowly, his performance in the arena started to improve. Being able to shadow the Nightmare Creatures not only enhanced his battle style, but also made them more predictable, and thus less dangerous.

Of course, the task had not been easy. In fact, understanding how the Corrupted fought and what impulses guided them was, in a sense, much harder than deciphering even the most sophisticated battle style. Their minds were perverted, bizarre, and alien to everything he had ever known.

And yet, he had nothing else to do but practice, as if his life depended on it. Because it quite literally did.

And eventually, his efforts bore fruit.

Sunny couldn't quite remember when he had made a breakthrough, but at some point, he found himself being able to understand the Nightmare Creatures much better. From that point onward, his mastery of Shadow Dance, which had been stagnating since the Dreamscape tournament, finally started advancing once again.

And with frightening speed.

Now, Sunny was able to use Shadow Dance to assume the shape and form of all his enemies, at least in his mind, and thus know how they were going to try and destroy him. By knowing that, he had been able to anticipate and kill them first, instead, one after another, day after day, week after week…

And here he was.

Barely remembering who he was.

As Elyas healed his wounds, Sunny stared at the dead Warmonger, his scowl growing deeper and deeper.

'Am I… becoming a Nightmare Creature?'

The thought sent a cold shiver running down his spine.

How did one become Corrupted, anyway?

…Some time later, back in the cage, Sunny stared into the darkness, scared. This… this was not a danger he had anticipated. Thrust into the terrible meat grinder of the arena, he had been so focused on surviving the terrifying battles that the possibility of having his very self annihilated, piece by little piece, had never occurred to him.

What, exactly, was happening to him?

Sunny stared at the unbreakable bars of his cage, and shuddered.

'Damn… I really, really need to get out of here…'

But how? He had been trying to escape all this time, with not even a

hint of a chance. The damned collar around his neck made sure that he would never be able to leave the coliseum...

His black eyes narrowed.

'No… no, I have to hold on, just a little longer. This madness is not going to last forever.'

It simply couldn't. Half of the cages in the dungeon were already empty, their inhabitants slaughtered on the red stones of the arena.

The Warmongers were slowly running out of slaves to kill.

And when their number decreased too much, with only the most ferocious and deadly monsters left…

Something was bound to happen.

...Wasn't it?

A cold feeling of despair drowned his mind.

'But what if it doesn't?'

# Chapter-611: Immortal Lords

After a while, shrouded in darkness, Elyas suddenly spoke, addressing Sunny in his usual one-sided manner.

In the past weeks, the young Awakened had developed a habit of sometimes speaking to his demonic partner, even though the frightening creature could not respond with anything more than an occasional nod, a shake of the head, or an indifferent shrug. Talking to Shadow was not much of a conversation, but...

Perhaps this was one of the few things that were keeping him sane.

…Sunny could understand why the youth had to do that, since his own inability to talk was one of the things that were driving him mad, that was robbing him of even more of his humanity.

"Hey, demon. Do you… do you think it's true? About the wooden sword…"

Sunny stared at the young man, then shrugged. He had no opinion on that topic, since he didn't know what the wooden sword was.

Elyas sighed.

"Before the Warmongers captured us, I had heard of their cruel Trials. Everyone back home has, really. The horrors of the Red Colosseum is something every parent tells their children, to make them behave."

He grew silent, and then continued after some time, his voice even:

"...But they also say that there is a way to escape this terrible place. If one is brave enough… if they are righteous enough… then they would eventually be given a wooden sword, and earn the right to fight for their freedom."

Sunny shifted slightly, tilting his head.

'What a nice fairy tale…'

The poor kid was deceiving himself if he thought that the worshippers of War were going to just let them go. Bravery, righteousness… these concepts were alien to the insane zealots.

Or rather, they understood it all differently.

Sunny had spent enough time observing the Warriors — or Warmongers, as Elyas called them — to understand that they were not evil people, or at least did not consider themselves as such. Their worldview was twisted and ruthlessly cruel, but more or less simple.

They believed in struggle, and glory. One had to struggle to achieve glory, and the struggle itself was the most glorious thing. That was why they were happy and joyful when watching their new favorite, Shadow, slaughter his way through the arena, no matter who or what he was killing — Nightmare Creatures or their own friends and family.

...Because dying while struggling against an overwhelming foe was the highest form of glory. Dying by his hand was a privilege and an expression of virtue.

The only thing more righteous than being killed by a stronger enemy… was to kill that enemy instead.

In their mind, the Warriors saw what they were doing to the slaves not as a cruel injustice, but as a benevolent gift. The slaves were not forced to slaughter each other for the entertainment of the crowd. Instead, they were generously given a chance to walk the path of righteousness and strive toward glory...

That was why Sunny didn't think that any of the slaves would ever be allowed to walk free of the colosseum. Doing so would be the greatest sin, a shameful offense that the Warmongers, in their perverse benevolence, would never visit upon their prisoners.

To them, that would have been the vilest form of cruelty.

'Damned lunatics…'

Sunny was not sure that all followers of War God were this bizarre. In fact, he was pretty certain that this murderous sect had been born here, in the Kingdom of Hope. The slavers he had met in the First Nightmare worshipped the same god, but were nothing like these battlesworn zealots…

The Kingdom of Hope was a very strange place throughout, from what little he had gathered from Elyas's words.

Sunny now knew that he had been sent into a time period around a thousand years after the destruction of the real kingdom by Sun God. Now, only the name remained. People inhabiting these lands did not even know who the Demon of Desire was, really, only that she had been punished by the gods and imprisoned in the Ivory Tower.

And that their duty was to guard her prison.

In this duty, the people of the kingdom were led by seven lords. Or rather, five, since two had already perished.

The Ivory Tower itself had not been separated from the rest of the isles yet, and remained at the center of the region, surrounded by a large city — the beautiful city of aerial bridges and white aqueducts that he had seen rebuild itself from ashes at the start fo the Nightmare. Elyas's home.

The Ivory City was populated by the followers of Sun God, and protected by two of the remaining five lords.

The west of the region belonged to the second most populous faction of the Kingdom of Hope, the followers of War, and this was where Sunny had the misfortune to find himself. He had seen the statues of War God here and there in the arena, even though they did not resemble the one he had witnessed on the strange island that a circular river flowed through.

These statues of the God of War, as well as of life, progress, technology, craft, intellect, and humanity all depicted him as a mighty warrior in heavy armor, wielding a bloodied spear and a

cracked shield.

The Warriors were also led by one of the lords — a beautiful priestess of War whose name was...

Solvane. The dazzling beauty was one of the rulers of the Kingdom of Hope.

The followers of War God and Sun God seemed to be in conflict with each other, and so were the lords leading them. That was how Elyas and his family had ended up captured and brought into the arena, to serve as slaves fighting in the Trials.

The remaining two lords were neutral and of no consequence, since their factions were much smaller and wielded no real power. One resided far to the north, and the other somewhere in the east. Elyas did not know much about them, and so Sunny didn't either.

…He just knew that the five lords were, without a doubt, the eternal shackles mentioned in the description of the Undying chain. Immortal jailers created by Sun God to keep Hope imprisoned in her tower, chained… forever.

What had once been a suspicion of his now turned into a certainty. There were just too many clues, some of which he had collected before venturing into the Seed, and some that he had picked up from the young man's words.

And maybe… just maybe… that knowledge could help him gain freedom.

# Chapter-612: Red Colosseum

'Wooden sword… fight for their freedom…'

Sunny shifted slightly, causing his cage to sway, and glanced at Elyas. The youth was not in a talking mood anymore and just sat quietly, staring into the darkness.

There was something, a hint of a meaning, in what he had said. Sunny tried desperately to catch that meaning, but for some reason, his thoughts kept returning to the statues of War God.

He had seen two depictions of the fearsome deity in the Kingdom of Hope.

One was a warrior in heavy armor, wielding a bloodied spear and a cracked shield — both, presumably, representing warfare and battle — and the other was a woman wearing nothing but a beast hide around her waist, holding a spear in one hand and a beating human heart in another… the spear representing her dominion over war, technology, and craft perhaps, the heart representing her connection to life and humanity.

Why were these statues so different?

Sunny was still exhausted after the furious battles of the past day, his thoughts slow and feverish, as they often were these days. Frustrated, he rubbed his face, then scratched at it with sharp claws, slicing the skin apart. The pain washed the fog shrouding his mind away, allowing him to think clearly for a few minutes.

The Altar of War… that was what Solvane had called the island where the primeval statue of the Goddess of Life stood. And that was the right word — this depiction of the deity seemed much more primal, bestial… ancient.

The statue itself seemed incredibly ancient, too. Much older than the statues of the mighty warrior were… in fact, it seemed as ancient as the Red Colosseum itself, or perhaps even older. Old enough to have been created before the Kingdom of Hope was shattered and turned into the chain of floating islands by Sun God, as it was today, and would be thousands of years into the future.

Why would Hope have a monument to one of the gods in her domain? Well, the idea itself was not that strange. Gods and daemons had not been always at war, after all. In fact, the Prince of the Underworld had a shrine to the Goddess of the Black Skies, Storm God, in his very tower — despite the fact that later, she would become his mortal enemy.

So that question was not important… the important thing was that Sunny couldn't stop thinking about the statue, for some reason.

'As ancient as the Red Colosseum itself…'

Suddenly, Sunny tilted his head.

'Huh?'

The white amphitheater, and the arena it surrounded, were the derelict of the true Kingdom of Hope, as well. He had realized that fact a while back, partially from how they looked, and partially from how deep and ancient some of the shadows hiding in the corners of the dungeon felt.

In fact, Sunny suspected that the theater had not always been a battle arena. It reminded him of the giant quarry at the roots of the Hollow Mountains, where the seven heroes of the Forgotten Shore had excavated stone to build the mighty walls of their city, and the Crimson Spire itself.

Ivory City had to have been built out of something, too… so this place must have been a similar quarry, once, and had served as the source of the white stones used to construct those aerial bridges and aqueducts.

Later, it had been turned into a theater, and later still, the

Warmongers usurped that theater and made it into an arena, soaking the ancient stones with so much blood that they turned red.

His black eyes narrowed.

'This is it… this must be it…'

All this time, Sunny had been tormented by one paradoxical question. A question that was of utmost importance for his attempts to gain freedom.

…If this was an era where the Nightmare Spell did not exist yet, then how could Solvane put him on a leash capable of severing his connection to the Spell?

The collar was a simple piece of enchanted metal, with no lock or any other way of opening it. It was almost impossible to damage or destroy, but the enchantment itself was not very complicated… Sunny could feel that it wasn't. What it did, however, was tie him to the vast and incredibly powerful enchantments of the arena itself.

Those enchantments were harnessed by the Warmongers to maintain the cages, prevent the slaves from escaping by any means, mundane or magical, and ensure that they behaved while being transported to and, very rarely, back from the arena.

His inability to connect to the Spell almost seemed like a side effect of these measures.

But what could even interfere with the Spell, let alone accidentally?

And now, he felt as if he had found the answer! If the Red Colosseum was, indeed, not built by the Warriors, but only usurped by them, then it was indeed very clear.

…Sorcery of another daemon could. If the Demon of Desire was the original creator of the theater, then the enchantments left behind by her would probably do the job of messing with the Spell weaved from the Strings of Fate by her older sibling.

Sunny shifted, grasping the bars of the cage.

Suddenly, a powerful emotion burst in his chest, filling his muscles with renewed strength, and his mind with desperate resolve.

…Hope. It was hope.

He didn't think of it as poison anymore. No... it was the opposite. A most powerful antidote.

If the Spell had been created by Weaver, and the enchantments interfering with it created by Hope… if all of this was the result of a clash between two types of daemonic sorcery…

Then why couldn't he, as an inheritor of a daemonic legacy, do something to resolve that clash?

Sure, Sunny knew nothing about weaving magic… but he had also not known anything about combat once, or how to live and fight in a body of an actual demon.

If there was one thing he was good at, it was learning new things.

Well… that, and lying.

And staying alive.

Staring at the ghastly dungeon surrounding him with new eyes, Sunny studied its ancient stone walls, and frowned.

So… how was one supposed to start learning sorcery?

# Chapter-613: Schools of Sorcery

There were hours left until they were going to be taken to the arena again. Sunny stared at the walls of the dungeon intently, as though hoping to glean some secrets from the ancient stones.

But what could he see? They were just old stones. There was nothing interesting on their surface, and neither was there anything interesting beneath it.

After a while, Sunny took a deep breath and sat down again, trying to make himself as comfortable as possible in the narrow cage. Then, he shut down his senses, pushing away the presence of countless abominations surrounding him, the stench of the prison, the pain in his exhausted body… everything that distracted him from thinking.

'What do I know about sorcery?'

That was a daunting question.

Even the word itself was deceptive. Humans of his world used it to describe any Aspect capable of dealing direct damage to the opponents, as opposed to augmenting the Awakened's combat ability — especially those that could do so from range. But that wasn't what Sunny was after.

No, what he was interested in was not the type of abilities that existed within the familiar framework of supernatural powers, but the very means used to create that framework, or at least those that existed outside the realm of Aspects.

That, to him, was true sorcery.

'But there are different kinds of such sorcery, as well… what are the ones that I've witnessed?'

Three came to mind. The first one he was familiar with the best — the spellweave, which he believed to be Weaver's own sorcery. The Spell itself was created from it, as well as all the magical items that the Spell gifted to the Awakened — Memories and Echoes. This was the magic that all humans knew, and most believed to be the only kind there is.

Sunny, however, had already learned that sorcery was not synonymous with the Spell, and that there were ways of creating magic different from spellweave.

The first of them he had witnessed inside the Echo of Saint, which had remnants of a much more primitive weave hiding beneath the usual pattern of ethereal strings before he turned her into a Shadow. Later, he encountered the same type of alien weave within the walls of the Ebony Tower.

This type of Sorcery belonged to the Prince of the Underworld, Weaver's younger sibling. The similarity between them was hard not to notice, but Sunny didn't know which of the daemons had copied which — whether Weaver perfected the sorcery created by their brother, or whether the youngest child of the Unknown had based the method of his craft on the eldest's invention.

Judging by these two types of sorcery, it was easy to imagine that all of them involved some kind of a weave. However, that conclusion would have been wrong… Sunny knew this because of the third type of magic he had encountered.

The miraculous creation of Sun God — the obsidian knife he had taken from the white altar of the Sanctuary of Noctis before leaving for the Night Temple, and was now resting, inaccessible, on the bottom of the Covetous Coffer.

The black knife had no weave hiding beneath its surface… instead, it was full of blinding radiance, as if encompassing a boundless ocean of soul essence, with a single String of Fate placed into the pristine light as it folded on itself endlessly and formed a neverending circle.

That was the sorcery of Sun God… if a deific miracle could even be called sorcery. In any case, the obsidian knife — and later, the

wooden one he had used to kill Solvane — proved that one didn't have to base their magic on a weave of some sort. This was just the unique way Weaver cast his, and their brother followed.

So… Hope's sorcery might have been completely unique, too.

Trapped in the iron cage, Sunny frowned. How was he supposed to search for something that could have looked like anything?

Come to think of it… there was another type of sorcery that he had encountered. Or rather, several different ones, all united by the same method of creation: runic magic.

The first time he had seen it was underneath the ruined cathedral of the Dark City, in a small cell where a corpse wearing Weaver's mask had been chained within a broken circle. That circle was carved into the stone floor, surrounded by countless symbols that Sunny had not recognized.

The Gateway within the Crimson Spire was surrounded by a circle of runes, too… as well as the stone arch on the last level of the Ebony Tower and the one connected to it, situated in the beautiful white gazebo on the Ivory Island.

Another place where he had encountered sorcerous runes was the Night Temple… there, they had been either inscribed by someone from clan Valor, or at least found and repurposed by them.

So, basically, he was familiar with three general types of creating sorcery. One was the spellweave, as well as a version of it used by the Prince of the Underworld. The other was the divine miracles of Sun God, which he couldn't even begin to understand.

And the last one was based on the inscription of runes, and seemed to have been mostly used by humans — here in the Kingdom of Hope and on the neighboring Forgotten Shore.

'Huh…'

There was a small discrepancy, however.

'Why was the portal in the Ebony Tower created with runic magic

instead of the primitive spellweave, like everything else in there?'

Was it, perhaps, because the connecting portal on the Ivory Island had been? The Prince of the Underworld had built the tower in the Sky Below long after Hope had built hers, after all. In fact, he had done so after his sister was already imprisoned, to harvest the divine flames that had destroyed her domain.

It would have made sense for him to use runic magic to invade an already existing system of portals that had been based on it.

So… was Hope, perhaps, the source of runic magic? Or at least a user of it?

Sunny sighed, feeling spent and tired, then closed his eyes.

He had to sleep at least a little, to allow his body and mind some rest before tomorrow's battles.

Especially now that he had not only to survive them, but also do so while searching for any sign of hidden runes throughout the arena…

# Chapter-614: Hope's Canvas

A new day brought with it a new portion of pain, hardship, and despair.

Sunny and Elyas were dragged into the arena, the same Ascended warmonger guiding them by the chains attached to the collars. Sunny stumbled forward, his gaze locked on the man's broad back.

The jailer was incredibly tall for a human, his height more than even that of the shadow demon Sunny was currently inhabiting. His figure was solemn and powerful, a sense of terrifying strength radiating from it in almost physical waves. The apostle of War wore the same ragged leather armor and a tattered red robe, his features hidden behind a deep hood.

In all these weeks, Sunny had never seen his face, or heard him speak.

The great blade on the Ascended warrior's back looked special, too. It was definitely enchanted with very powerful magic… now that Sunny turned his thoughts to the nature of sorcery, he was silently studying the line of runes inscribed along the edge of the heavy weapon.

'Runic magic again…'

That made sense… how else were these ancient people supposed to enchant their weapons? It was not like they could rely on Memories and spellweave. That said, magical weapons seemed to be much rarer in the Kingdom of Hope than in the waking world. Most of the Awakened Sunny had fought in the arena wielded either mundane ones or those possessing weak, primitive enchantments.

It was the far cry from the powerful Memories he was used to, although Sunny did not know if that was the nature of this era, or just another sign of the ubiquitous regression that seemed to reign in

what remained of the Kingdom of Hope. Everything here seemed devolved, worn out, and on the verge of falling apart.

The whole region was obviously in decline, and had been for some time now.

...While studying the runes on the great blade, he also noticed that it had a few new nicks. The leather armor of the silent giant had more scratches than before, as well…

It seemed that the Ascended was participating in the battles in the arena himself.

'I guess I'll have to fight that monster too, eventually...'

Finally, a rusty iron gate appeared in front of them, blinding sunlight streaming through its bars. The rumbling voices of the crowd echoed from the stone walls, washing over him like a cursed tide.

The gate swung open, and the chains came off of their collars. Sunny and Elyas entered the first killing box and watched as their opponents crawled out of a similar tunnel.

The young Awakened brandished his weapon — a short spear fashioned out of a long twisting horn — and forced out a weak smile.

"Luck... luck is on our side today, Demon! These creatures are called Burrowers. On solid stone, their main advantage is gone! Just don't let them swallow you…"

Sunny snarled, then dashed forward with a roar.

…Hard. Today was going to be hard.

He was forced to use Shadow Dance to peer into the souls of the Nightmare Creatures, despite suspecting that doing so too much threatened to destroy his already unsteady mind. He also had to both concentrate on the fight and thoroughly study the ancient theater, in hopes of discovering signs of Hope's sorcery.

It was almost like his first training sessions with Saint, when he had to resist the taciturn monster while simultaneously keeping an eye on

his shadow to decipher the secret of its dance. The problem was that, back then, he had ended up beaten black and blue by Saint most of the time.

Now, he couldn't allow himself to lose.

Sunny descended upon the repulsive Burrowers, which looked like sacks of bulbous flesh with giant circular maws gaping in them, and tried to slaughter the abominations without being eaten alive.

…The first fight came and went, and then, it was time for the second one, and then the third one, and then the fourth.

Sunny had slain the vicious Burrowers, and then a creature that resembled a giant walking skeleton, its bones green and as tough as granite, and then a swarm of monstrous ants that covered the floor of the arena like a carpet, and then a being that was like an oozing mountain of mire sludge that had long, razor-sharp steel sickles protruding from it.

His body was torn, and sliced, and crushed, and gnawed on. Elyas had healed the most terrible wounds, but the rest remained, not worthy of having precious soul essence wasted on them, yet.

Sunny was once again overwhelmed by pain, rage, and the desperate need to fight for his survival. Everything else disappeared… the only thing that remained was battle, blood, and murder.

And fear.

...However, today, that wasn't enough.

He fought through the battle fog that encompassed his mind and kept searching, studying every corner of the Red Colosseum — the floor of the arena, the walls surrounding it, the rows of seats rising above — in search of intricately engraved runes.

But all he saw were the statues of War God, the jubilant faces of the spectators, and the weathered surface of ancient stones. There was no hint of any engravings anywhere.

'Where are you… where...'

The fifth battle almost cost him his life. While fighting against a familiar foe — a giant worm-like creature that possessed a seemingly endless reserve of vitality — Sunny had tripped on the uneven surface of the floor of the arena, lost his balance, and tumbled down.

If not for Elyas, who fearlessly jumped forward and pulled the attention of the terrible abomination to himself, he would have been viciously mauled, or even lost his life.

Back when Sunny had fought a worm like that the first time, the creature eventually succumbed to the soul damage continuously dealt to it by the Cruel Sight. Today, however, he had no deadly Memory to help him… only his claws, his fangs, and his horns.

In the end, Sunny had to literally rip the giant abomination to shreds. Only when its body was torn apart completely did the worm stop regenerating new flesh and recovering from all the wounds, and finally died.

Exhausted, Sunny fell to his knees and breathed hoarsely, then threw a hateful glance at the crowd chanting his name. Finally, he lowered his head and glared at the wide groove in the red stone of the arena that had almost cost him his life.

There were several grooves like that in some of the killing boxes, cutting through the floor of the colosseum like broad channels meant for the rivers of blood to flow through them. Usually, he took note of their placement in advance to avoid losing his footing at a dire moment, but today, with his attention split between the battles and the need to study the arena, Sunny had failed in that regard.

'Damn thing… why couldn't they just make the arena flat?!'

Well, the answer was obvious. All that blood had to go somewhere, and if not for these grooves, the whole colosseum would have slowly turned into one giant crimson pool.

He frowned.

'Wait… that doesn't make sense, though…'

Sunny lingered, noticing that the gate to the sixth box was already

opening.

The grooves were as ancient as the Red Colosseum itself… which meant that they had been here long before the Warmongers started holding their demented Trials here. Long before the name Red Colosseum was even given to it.

Which meant that these grooves had been cut through the stone back when it had still been pristine white, and had no blood spilled on it.

So… serving as channels that took away blood could not have been their purpose.

Sunny's lightless eyes narrowed. Suddenly, he realized his mistake.

All this time, he had been looking for the sorcerous runes while expecting them to look like they had the previous times he encountered them — intricate, small, and numerous, arranged into shapes and patterns. And yet, he had found nothing.

But, in fact, the runes were right in front of him the whole time… or rather, beneath his feet.

He was just too small and insignificant to notice them, like an ant crawling across a vast painting and failing to see the whole image for what it was.

There were no circles of intricate runes carved anywhere in the colosseum… instead, the whole vastness of the ancient arena was a runic circle, a canvas Hope had used to create her sorcery.

…He was standing on it.

# Chapter-615: Ancient Runes

The runes Hope had used were not small, intricate, and elaborate. Instead, they were giant, spanning the whole width of the blood-soaked arena, and guided torrential floods of soul energy instead of thin streams of it to create the unimaginably powerful enchantments.

Once Sunny knew where to look, it didn't take him long to start noticing a pattern and meaning in the placement and direction of the grooves cut in the ancient stone. The problem was, their scope was too great to be perceived from the floor of the arena. He would have been able to see the entirety of the runes, perhaps, from the very top of the amphitheater.

But fighters were never allowed to leave the battlefield, unless it was to return to the dungeon.

…In the absence of an aerial view, all he could do was to try and compile the disjointed pieces of the puzzle in his mind. By now, Sunny had fought in most of the killing boxes in the arena, except for a few.

After defeating another group of Warmongers and being thrown back into the cage, he spent the entire night trying to remember each of the stages he had shed blood on, and the pattern of the grooves on their floor. It was like assembling a complicated puzzle, only instead of the actual pieces, all he had were fragmented memories of them.

Luckily, his memory had always been good. In fact, after becoming an Awakened and having the opportunity to interact with a lot of different people, many of whom were very smart and educated, Sunny realized that his ability to instantly memorize things was somewhat unnatural even among them. Before, he had just assumed that everyone could do the same.

Still, he had to have paid attention to a thing in order to remember it,

which was not the case with all of the grooves — only those that had happened to appear in his way. Plus, he was also having trouble determining how the irregularly shaped killing boxes were situated in relation to each other, since that wasn't something he had thought about before.

The task of creating a perfect three-dimensional replica of the entire arena in his mind was not an easy one.

Over the next few days, he was somewhat distracted while fighting the Nightmare Creatures in the Red Colosseum. Confounded by the fact that their enemies were growing stronger and stronger as all the weaker slaves were being slowly slaughtered, his performance suffered.

And that meant more injuries, more pain, and more torment.

Sometimes, he felt utterly beaten, broken, and hopeless. Sunny was familiar with suffering and hardship, and had experienced a fair share of horrific anguish in his life… but the Trial of the Red Colosseum had turned out to be a hell so dire that even he was having difficulty enduring its burden. It was simply too cruel, too odious, too vile…

And that harrowing torture was not going to end until he gave up.

But he didn't. The strange task of peering into the secrets of the Demon of Desire kept him going, no matter how wounded his body and how broken his spirit became. It was almost like an obsession. Sunny continued to fight, and kill, and suffer… and study the ancient stones.

His mental condition deteriorated so much that even Elyas, who was going through his own terrible ordeal, noticed that something was very wrong with his taciturn demonic partner. The young man tried to encourage the shadow creature as well as he could, but what could he say to soothe the soul-crushing despair of their situation?

They were enslaved, locked in cages, and forced to fight for their lives against a swarm of deadly monsters, only to be thrown back behind the iron bars, fed the raw flesh of the abominations they had

just killed, and go through the whole nightmare again the next day, with no hope of ever escaping except for through death… through being killed and eaten by the other prisoners of the Red Colosseum.

Even their captors seemed to be trapped by the Colosseum, chained in the same vicious cycle, and doomed to eventually share the same fate as their slaves. Inside this ancient theater, only bloodshed and madness reigned.

…And yet, all of it was not for nothing. Eventually, after Sunny had lost count of the days they had spent in the colosseum, he finally managed to create a complete image of it in his head. With it came the understanding of the shapes of the giant runes that were cut in the bloodsoaked stone.

And with that understanding came the ability to peer into their purpose.

After learning the shape and position of the runes, Sunny found himself able to peer beneath the surface of the stone and see their function. The ability had always been within him, hiding in the depths of his changed eyes… he just had not known where and how to look, like he had not been aware of his ability to see the soul cores of creatures before clashing with Mordret within the Soul Sea.

Armed with the new knowledge, Sunny was able to perceive vast rivers of soul essence flowing beneath the arena and through its walls, following intricate paths carved for it by the immense runes.

In the end, that was what sorcery was — the ability to guide and shape hidden energies, most often that of souls, to express one's will upon the world… the enchantments were simply expressions of the enchanter's will, and the runes were the building blocks with which the enchanter manipulated the movement of energy to achieve their goal.

But where was all this soul energy coming from?

At first, Sunny assumed that the Red Colosseum was similar to the Crimson Labyrinth, and fed on the souls of creatures slain within it.

Slaves slaughtering each other in the arena must have been empowering the sorcery enslaving them by the very act of slaughter… but after observing the flow of soul essence through the ancient structure for a while, he realized that his initial theory was wrong.

Instead of the fighters... it was the crowd of spectators that fueled the enchantments. It was their jubilation, their elation, their sincere excitement that were the source of all the power flowing through the ancient theater. Of course… why would the Demon of Desire base her sorcery on death?

Her domain was built upon dreams, emotions, and passion. It was only after the followers of War God had usurped the colosseum that the subject of all this passion became battle, bloodshed, and murder. The current state of the arena was not how it had been supposed to be... it was stolen, perverted, and made into something utterly different.

...Corrupted.

More than a month had already passed after Sunny entered the Second Nightmare. The dungeon was growing less and less crowded, most of the prisoners long killed on the bloody stones of the arena. The end of the hateful Trials — whatever it was supposed to be — was approaching.

Now, he knew the basic principle of how the enchantments keeping him tied to the Red Colosseum functioned…

So, the question was, how was he supposed to use that knowledge to escape?

# Chapter-616: Black String

Sunny had no clue how to create, decipher, or manipulate runic magic. His inherent ability to see the weave and inner structure of magical items, the one he had received after consuming the drop of ichor that fell from Weaver's eye, also gifted him with an innate understanding of the essence of spellweave.

While studying the Memories created by Spell, Sunny was not able to fully understand the intricate purpose of the vast patterns of ethereal strings… but he at least could intuitively feel a hint of it.

He had no such advantage when it came to other forms of sorcery. So, despite the fact that he had managed to perceive the enchantments encompassing the Red Colosseum, it was not like he could simply change them, or create new ones to counteract the old.

He could study the runes, of course… but with no teacher and only his wit and intelligence to help him draw the correct conclusions from observing various enchantments, it would take hundreds of years to gain enough insight to learn how to create any meaningful runic sorcery of his own.

Sunny, however, wasn't discouraged. Yes, he would not be able to create runic sorcery any time soon.

But destroying things was always much easier than making them.

Locked inside the narrow cage, surrounded by the smell of Nightmare Creatures and filth, Sunny stared into the darkness and thought.

Destroy the enchantments of the Red Colosseum…

In theory, it was simple to achieve. He just had to break enough runes to disrupt the paths they created for the soul energy. The problem with that, however, was that the runes Hope had used were

giant, and carved into nearly unbreakable stone. Sunny doubted that he would be able to do enough damage to the arena to cause its sorcery to fail.

...Causing a smaller and temporary disruption, however, was not entirely impossible. He felt that he would be able to achieve that much, at least… perhaps enough to free himself of the binding enchantment for a few seconds.

Would several seconds of freedom be enough to escape this cursed place?

It was going to have to be…

As he waited in the darkness, a seed of a desperate plan started forming in his mind.

***

At some point, Sunny straightened and sat cross-legged at the center of the cage, causing it to sway lightly. Raising one of his four monstrous hands, he stared at it for a while, and then commanded shadow essence to stream forward, concentrating at the tips of his fingers.

Ever since he had consumed Weaver's alabaster phalanx and acquired Bone Weave, the tactile sense of his fingers went through a strange metamorphosis. It was now much more nuanced, vibrant, and keen. Even though his hands were currently bestial and covered by thick calluses, this sensitivity remained.

As shadow essence concentrated in the tips of his fingers, he felt a strange, ghostly tingling sensation. It was so real as to almost appear physical…

Tentatively raising another hand, Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then pinched the air near one of his tingling fingers and tried to pull essence outward.

To his surprise, it worked.

In his mind's eye, a strand of darkness suddenly extended into the air,

summoned by his hand. It didn't look like one of the radiant strings he was used to seeing inside Memories, and neither did it look like the flowing liquid that essence was usually depicted as.

Instead, the strand of shadow essence looked like a tenebrous fog, similar to the grey wisps that rose from Saint's armor when one of the shadows wrapped itself around her.

It was insubstantial, ephemeral, and elusive, not at all like the sharp and beautiful strings that spellweave was created of.

Sunny frowned slightly, and pulled the fog with one hand while trying to get a hold of it with the other, wishing to draw it taut, and thus more concentrated.

However, this small movement instantly caused the strand to break, dissipate, and disappear, blown away by a gust of wind.

'This… is going to take some time.'

Grim, Sunny continued to draw on his shadow essence and try to form it into a thin and durable string, emptying a small portion of his reserves with each failure. By the time morning came, he had not made any progress at all, and only managed to waste most of his essence in futile attempts.

Fighting after wasting so much power was going to cost him a lot.

Soon, the Ascended jailer appeared from the darkness, chains rattling on his belt. Sunny glanced at the giant in a tattered red robe, and then closed his eyes for a moment.

'Doesn't matter… it doesn't matter. I'll be dead either way. But now, at least, there's a chance…'

He fought in the arena, killed the Nightmare Creatures, retrieved the soul shards to empower Elyas, and then barely survived in the battle against the Awakened Warriors on the final stage.

At night, he continued to experiment with shadow essence, trying to shape the elusive fog into something resembling an ethereal, resilient string. When his essence ran dry, he slept for a few minutes, and then

woke up with a startle to start all over again.

When the morning came, he fought. When the murdering was over and done with, hidden in the darkness, he tried to weave strings out of the effervescent fog. The idea itself seemed ridiculous, mad, and impossible… how could something so intangible become something strong, durable, and distinct?

He sundered flesh and had his flesh sundered, then struggled to create something out of nothing, day after day, night after night.

Time lost any meaning… Sunny had already been struggling to hold on, but now, drained by the lack of sleep, the constant pressure of trying to shape essence into a magical string, and the need to fight in the arena with his reserves half-empty because of it, he was slowly sliding into the dark and bottomless abyss.

And yet, he persisted in his obsession, teaching his fingers to feel the smallest fluctuations of the fog, to guide and shape it, trying one approach after another, endlessly, without resting or giving up.

And by the time his second month in the Red Colosseum was coming to the end and most of the cages in the lightless dungeon hung empty…

Sunny suddenly straightened, staring at his cut, trembling hands.

Between them, a single ethereal string hovered, black as night, thinner than a hair, and as sharp as a diamond blade.

A low growl escaped from his mouth.

'It's done... I've done it!'

# Chapter-617: Simplest Weave

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then shifted slightly, causing the chain of his cage to rattle. Attracted by the sound, Elyas woke up from his restless sleep and stared into the darkness, a tired expression on his young face.

"...Demon? What happened?"

In the next moment, he heard the sound of a heavy body slamming against the iron bars, and then another crash. His partner's cage swung widely, and at the highest point of its swing, a long arm suddenly shot from between the bars, claws scraping against metal as Sunny took hold of the youth's own gibbet.

Elyas flinched.

"Wha... what are you doing?"

Sunny growled, trying to express his intention as best as he could. The young Awakened didn't know how to read the runic language he knew how to write, so this was the only way of communication between them. Luckily, an honest effort to answer truthfully was enough for the Flaw. It didn't punish Sunny for not being able to deliver the truth, as long as he really tried to.

Their cages hung diagonally, connected by his hand. Sunny groaned, straining his muscles to pull them even closer together. Then, staring at the young man's pale face, Sunny took hold of the bars with two more hands, and stretched the fourth one to grab the Awakened by the throat.

Elyas's eyes widened slightly, but he didn't even try to struggle. The youth simply looked at him, no fear written on his gaunt and emaciated, but still childishly soft face. Instead, there was only confusion... and trust.

Sunny sighed.

'What a fool. If I wanted to, I could have snapped his neck right here and now…'

Of course, he had no such intentions. Instead, Sunny brought the youth closer and stared intently at the steel collar wrapped around his neck, studying it. He couldn't really see his own, so this was the next best thing.

Elyas remained motionless for a while, then said:

"I don't know what you are trying to do, Demon, but you better stop it before the priest comes to check on the noise."

Sunny scowled, then let go, causing their cages to swing away from each other. Elyas was right… there were mere seconds left before the Ascended showed up, judging by how long it had taken the solemn giant to appear before. He was always somewhere near, ready to intervene in case the slaves misbehaved. Sunny had timed their jailer's reaction time in the past, so he knew that much.

It didn't matter, anyway. He had already seen all that he needed to see. The pattern of runes carved inside the collar, and the stream of soul essence running through it… this was what he needed to disrupt.

Sunny was going to have to work fast.

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Several days later, looking more like a corpse than a living being, he was laying at the bottom of the cage, looking at his hands. Between them, a complicated cradle of black strings was weaved together, forming a strange and hypnotic pattern. Sunny had advanced a lot in his ability to thread shadow strings and loop them between his fingers… sadly, it was not without cost.

The strings were ephemeral and unseen to anyone except him, which also meant that they could not interact with the material world. However, they could interact with his flesh, which was why two of his fingers were missing, each sliced away so cleanly that it seemed as though they had never existed.

Even his phalanxes, reinforced by the evolved Bone Weave, had not offered the essence strings any resistance. All that remained were two bloody stumps.

The rest of his fingers were cut and mangled, but still in place. Considering that there were eighteen of them left, he still had more than a human would. Not that it diminished the pain he was constantly experiencing.

It would have certainly been helpful to have a tool to work the black strings, instead of doing it with his bare hands… something like a needle, perhaps. Coincidentally, he had one of those in his possession, a needle used by Weaver themself, no less. But it was locked away in his Soul Sea, safely kept and utterly inaccessible inside the Covetous Coffer.

So, he just had to endure and be very, very careful, lest the number of his fingers diminished even further.

…There was another problem, though.

Sunny had inherited an intuitive understanding of the guiding principles of spellweave, but it was not like he really knew what to do. All he had was his memory of the spellweave patterns he had seen before, and a vague feeling of the purpose behind them.

This was not enough to master sorcery… but it was at least a start.

Each Memory he had studied before had unique enchantments, so he couldn't draw parallels between them and extrapolate how their weaves produced the desired effects. There were magical qualities that all Memories shared, however.

The ability to be summoned and dismissed, the ability to repair themselves unless completely destroyed, and the connection to the owner's soul.

Knowing these three ubiquitous traits, Sunny could, in theory, determine which parts of the weaves were the exact same across all Memories, and thus were responsible for these effects. Then, he could try to recreate them.

Each spellweave was incredibly complex, so recalling even a single pattern perfectly was a challenge, despite him having a very good memory. Sunny, however, had to recall not only many, but also do so with a sufficient degree of precision to be able to compare and find similarities between them.

And then, he had to somehow rebuild the repeating parts of those weaves with nothing but his bare hands and shallow reserves of shadow essence. The task seemed nearly impossible…

But, fueled by obsession, resolve, and desperation, he had succeeded.

…And also failed.

After thousands of attempts, Sunny was finally able to perfectly recreate one of the three patterns he had managed to isolate. But as soon as the pattern was complete, it instantly fell apart. No matter how many times he repeated the process, the result was the same.

For some reason, the weave didn't hold. It wasn't able to sustain itself.

Something was missing.

Today, Sunny was going to perform another experiment… perhaps the last one. He was tired, drained, and terribly hurt. Whatever hope he had managed to find before, in this bloodsoaked hell, was on the verge of running out. He was… he was almost ready to give up.

But not just yet.

There was one other thing that all Memories contained… not a part of the pattern of ethereal strings, but something different. A bright ember that served as the anchor and nexus for the strings, a point around which the whole pattern was structured. Memories of the first Tier had one, and those of the higher Tiers had several.

After considering that fact, Sunny had brought something back from the arena today… a single soul shard that he he had not given to Elyas, instead keeping it for himself. The shard had belonged to a fearsome Awakened demon he killed earlier today, in one of the killing boxes of the Red Colosseum.

Now, looking at the cat's cradle of ethereal black strings drawn between his fingers, he hesitated for a long time, and then carefully placed the gleaming crystal in its center.

Then, holding his breath, Sunny slowly started connecting each of the strings to the shard, moving his fingers with extreme speed and nimbleness. Slowly, a black pattern started shaping around the bright ember, strangely not permeating a different object, but instead looping back on itself.

And after something that felt like an eternity, with drops of blood rolling down his hands… Sunny finally let go of the strings and stared at the soul shard laying on his palm.

A beautiful pattern of tenebrous strings hovered in the air around it, stable, without a single flaw or weakness to cause it to fall apart.

He sighed, and then weaved the last string into the pattern, connecting its other end to the shadow core in his chest.

Finally, Sunny closed his eyes and gave the mental command.

In front of him, the soul shard disintegrated into a rain of white sparks, and then appeared once again, creating itself out of nothingness.

Sunny let out a long, heavy breath.

...This was the first sorcery he had woven.

# Chapter-618: Plan of Escape

Sunny breathed in, then breathed out, calming down his wildly beating hearts. His hands were trembling so hard that the softly gleaming soul shard almost fell out of his grip.

'Hey… hey, Elyas. Look... it's finished!'

He tiredly turned his head and let out a low growl, trying to attract the young man's attention. But his partner did not even move, laying at the bottom of his cage and staring into the darkness with bleak, hollow eyes.

The last few days, the youth's condition wasn't too good. He even stopped having his one-sided conversations with Sunny, and just sat quietly in the darkness, not moving, until the next morning came and it was time to fight again.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then turned away.

'It's alright… rest. I'll get us out of here soon. We will be free… free, Elyas! Just hold on a little longer!'

There wasn't much time left. In all of the vile dungeon, barely four dozen Nightmare Creatures were left alive. Their grotesque forms towered in the darkness, locked inside enchanted cages, the long stretches of empty space between hinting that the Trials of the Red Colosseum were going to come to an end soon.

And then, Solvane and her followers would spend another decade hunting down a new hecatomb of monsters to sacrifice to their bloodthirsty god.

Sunny's mouth twitched.

'Who cares… they are all just illusions, anyway. The real Solvane is

long dead… the real Elyas is dead, too. Who cares what happens to them?'

He stole a glance at the crestfallen youth, and then looked away.

…But were they, really?

Forcing his trembling hands to grow steady, Sunny hesitated, then studied the soul shard he had just enchanted.

He didn't know what the Spell used to create the embers serving as anchors for its weaves. Whatever it was, there certainly was a connection to soul cores… after all, the Tier — and subsequently, the number of nexuses a Memory's spellweave possessed — was directly tied to the number of soul cores that the source of the Memory had.

However, those embers weren't actual soul shards, most likely, since shards were harvested from the carcasses of Nightmare Creatures even if the kill had produced a Memory. Sunny didn't care, though… without a better alternative, all he could do was use one in place of the other.

He steadied himself, looked upon his demonic figure through the eyes of the shadow, and then dismissed the soul shard once again.

This time, however, Sunny did something strange… he willed the enchanted crystal to remain in an ambivalent state, not quite gone, but also not quite tangible.

Then, he reached into the weave of the black strings and slowly untangled it, breaking the loops and allowing the ends of the tenebrous threads to float free.

And finally, after that was done, he started to weave the whole pattern, including the ethereal soul shard, into the cold steel of his collar.

Slowly but surely, he integrated the spellweave into the band wrapped around his neck, submerging it into the flowing stream of soul essence. The task was tenuous, perplexing, and intricate… but it wasn't too complicated. The pattern was already made, and all he had to do was to connect it to a new vessel.

After a while, he was finished. The soul shard disappeared from his hands, and from the material world entirely. Instead, it was now burning beneath the surface of the collar, the black strings extending from it and spreading through the steel. Now, the collar looked almost like a Memory, and even its nexus was almost undistinguishable from the embers Sunny had seen before.

Of course, there was a second enchantment inside of it, this one much more complex and elaborate, crafted from ethereal runes. It was all a proper mess… just like he wanted it to be.

Sunny held his breath… and then tried to dismiss the collar.

The band of metal around his neck shimmered, and suddenly turned extremely cold. Inside, two energies clashed with each other, both enchantments momentarily failing.

He felt a sudden shift… a sudden change in the air, and inside of him, as though a long-forgotten part of his being had awakened from a long slumber. Full of fear and excitement, Sunny did something that he had done countless times before, but never knew to value.

'One…'

He summoned the runes.

Familiar symbols appeared in the air in front of him, their sight as sweet as honey.

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Awakened…

'Two…'

Sunny turned away from the runes and peered into the collar, observing the battle of the two enchantments within. Simultaneously, he grabbed the steel with two of his hands and threw all his monstrous strength into trying to pull it apart.

But the collar held firm, as if utterly indestructible.

'Three...'

On the count of seven, the soul shard he had placed within the band of steel suddenly burst into a myriad of sparks, and the weave of black strings he had so arduously threaded fell apart, turning into the grey fog and disappearing. The original flow of soul essence was unobstructed once again, and the runic enchantment resumed its function.

…Sunny was not disappointed. For now, all he wanted was to learn how long his sabotage was going to last.

'Seven seconds…'

A dark grin appeared on his face.

'...Seven seconds will be more than enough.'

***

The next day, hurting and barely alive, he brought another soul shard back with him from the arena. Tonight was going to be the night of their escape… Sunny wasn't sure that he would be able to endure any longer. If he had any chance to break free, he had to take it now.

The plan was long finalized in his mind, and even though he was frightened to put it in motion, there was no other way.

As Elyas fell on the bottom of his cage and closed his eyes, too tired to eat the disgusting raw meat thrown to them by the Ascended warrior, Sunny concentrated on weaving a new enchantment. He was now proficient enough to create black strings rather swiftly, even though hurrying threatened to cost him another finger or two.

Still, in a few hours, he had threaded enough to repeat the simple weave of a summoning enchantment.

Following the same steps that he had taken yesterday, Sunny created the pattern around the soul shard, and then integrated it into the collar.

The two enchantments clashed again, gifting him several short moments of freedom.

This time, Sunny did not waste any of them.

As soon as the enchantment of the collar was disrupted, breaking his connection to the Red Colosseum, he took a deep breath… and fell through the shadows.

A moment later, Sunny found himself standing on the cold stone floor, a couple of steps away from a swaying, empty cage.

He was free!

For six more seconds, at least...

# Chapter-619: Seven Seconds

'Seven.'

Sunny stepped through the shadows and appeared outside of the cage, his towering figure finally free and unconstrained by the suffocating iron bars. He staggered as excruciating pain spread through his mutilated flesh, a myriad of badly healed wounds reminding him of their festering existence, and hissed.

Elyas suddenly moved, confused by the direction from which the familiar hiss came. Then, he grabbed the bars and stared at Sunny with wide eyes.

"How…"

All of a sudden, he could see his partner clearly in the darkness, because the obsidian body of the shadow creature had become enveloped by a storm of swirling sparks of light. Sunny had begun to summon his Memories — the Undying Chain, the Cruel Sight, the Midnight Shard, the Prowling Thorn…

'Six.'

The stygian serpent drawn on his skin suddenly moved, slithering forth to turn into a fearsome black odachi. Its sharp tip appeared in the air above one of Sunny's hands, and grew, swiftly forming into the length of the great blade.

At the same time, two ruby eyes ignited in the depths of his shadow with a furious light.

Elyas flinched, staring at the gaunt demon in front of him in stunned awe.

'Five.'

Saint stepped out of the darkness, her graceful figure as black as the onyx, her posture straight and indomitable. Her hands were empty, devoid for now of any weapon.

Sunny stared at his Shadow with grim joy, and then bared his fangs, greeting her. He wasn't sure, but he thought that he noticed a slight change to the set of the taciturn knight's shoulders. Had she... missed him too?

'Four.'

The hilt of the Soul Serpent fell into his hand, the length of the odachi considerably increased to account for his towering height. Sunny didn't hesitate and threw the great blade to Saint, who caught it calmly and weighed the weapon in her hand, the hue of her ruby eyes suddenly growing a little brighter. It almost seemed like the Shadow was… excited?

Sunny glanced into the depths of the dungeon, where dozens of mighty Nightmare Creatures still remained locked in cages, waiting for their turn to be slaughtered in the arena.

Then, he turned to Saint.

'Three.'

...And said:

'Kill them. Kill them all!'

She tilted her head, sparing him a short look, and then wordlessly disappeared into the darkness, the black blade of the Soul Serpent raised to deliver the first killing blow.

'Two.'

A moment later, something whistled through the air, and a bestial scream thundered in the silence of the nightmarish dungeon. Sunny wasn't paying attention, though… the plan was already in motion, and his efforts were required somewhere else.

The familiar voice whispered into his ear, making him shiver.

[You have slain…]

…Oh, how he longed to hear it once more!

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

In one of Sunny's hands, a somber shortsword appeared, weaved out of tenebrous fog.

'One'.

In another, a stalwart tachi manifested itself. Sunny gripped the hilt of the Midnight Shard with both of his upper hands, leaving the Cruel Sight in one of the lower ones.

The Undying Chain finally finished appearing from a whirlwind of white sparks, covering his body with a caparace of bleak steel. Its shape changed to accommodate Sunny's monstrous body, new plates of perfectly fitted armor encompassing his digitigrade legs, his four arms, and even his long tail, a sharp metal spike protruding from the tip of it.

His gauntlets ended in vicious steel claws, and his helmet had two holes at the top for his curved horns to fit through.

Instead of a gaunt creature with a terribly mangled body, a fearsome steel goliath now stood amid the empty cages, jagged horns crowning the featureless steel plane of his face.

'Zero.'

Sunny dismissed his helmet and felt the collar snap back into function. Immediately, he sensed that his ability to Shadow Step was restrained again, and his connection to the Spell was cut. The sparks that had almost coalesced into the Prowling Thorn disappeared, and the unfinished form of the heavy kunai with them.

…It didn't matter. He had already achieved everything he needed to achieve in these seven seconds.

Sunny could have used that time to Shadow Step as far as he could, escaping the premises of the Red Colosseum. However, that would

have left him with no essence in the middle of Solvane's territory, with the accursed collar still wrapped around his neck.

It was easy to leave the Red Colosseum, but it was much harder to escape it. As long as Sunny was collared, he was going to remain tied to the enchantments of the ancient theater. He was still going to be a slave.

Plus… there was a thing he wasn't willing to leave behind.

Sunny heard Saint slaughtering the second Nightmare Creature and turned to Elyas, who was staring at him with wide eyes.

The youth was still trapped in the cage…

Of course, Sunny could have left him to die. In fact, doing so was probably an obvious decision. The young Awakened wasn't real, after all.

Only, maybe, he was…

Sunny had no idea whether these people were illusions or not. That was what the government and the common knowledge had told him. But was that knowledge the truth? He wasn't sure.

All he knew was that the shadows of the Mountain King and the old slaver he had killed in the First Nightmare were still in his Soul Sea, indistinguishable from all the rest of the creatures he had slain in the real world and the Dream Realm.

An illusion created by the Spell, if that was what they were, might as well have possessed a soul, and a shadow… if so, were they so different from real people?

In any case, it didn't really matter. In the reality of the Nightmare, Elyas was a living being. His partner. Sunny was determined to save him, as well.

The two of them were fated to die in the arena. Well… fate could go screw itself. They had kept each other alive in the Red Colosseum, and now, both of them were going to escape it. Together. That was his furious, adamant resolution.

Plus… Sunny really, really needed Elyas for his plan of escape to work.

The problem, however, was the cage. It was forged out of the same indestructible alloy as their collars. So getting the youth out of it was not going to be easy…

With a low growl, Sunny jumped onto the hanging cage, grabbing the bars with the curved talons on his feet, and swung the Midnight Shard. He wasn't aiming at the cage itself… instead, he was aiming at the chain attaching it to the ceiling.

Reinforced by the shadows, the austere tachi cut through the rusty chain, easily breaking it apart. The cage fell to the floor, sending a loud rumble rolling through the dark dungeon, and then toppled to the side.

Locked inside, Elyas was thrown down. Almost immediately, though, the youth regained his balance and crouched, staring at Sunny with wild eyes.

"Hurry! Whatever you're planning, Demon, hurry! The priest is going to be here soon!"

Sunny shivered, remembering the aura of savage, crushing strength radiating from their Ascended jailer, and the cold glint of his terrifying blade.

Elyas didn't need to remind him… Sunny was painfully aware of how little time he had left…

# Chapter-620: Death

The metal of the collars and the cages could not be broken… but it didn't mean that it couldn't be bent. Twisting a band of steel wrapped tightly around your neck would not have been a great idea, however, the iron bars trapping Elyas were another matter entirely.

Sunny just needed good leverage, and that was why he had cut the cage down.

Throwing a nervous look back, in the direction from which the Red Priest usually appeared, he gritted his teeth and thrust one hand through the bars, pushing Elyas back. He needed to soften the metal first, and that was going to be a dire process.

The blade of the Cruel Sight suddenly shone with radiant white light, spreading an almost palpable heat into the cold air of the ghastly dungeon. Sunny didn't linger and pressed the somber sword against the steel bars, letting the divine flame contained within share its immolating incandescence with the enchanted cage.

'Come on… come on…'

There were two possible results for his actions. One was that he would be able to soften the metal and bend it… the other was that he was going to cook Elyas alive inside the gibbet.

There was also the chance that their Ascended jailer would arrive quicker than usual, which would be really, really, really bad...

Sunny counted the seconds and stared at the iron bars, willing them to heat up swifter. Slowly, the cold metal turned slightly red, then bright orange. Finally, at the point where the incandescent blade of the Cruel Sight touched them, a hint of pure white appeared.

Sunny would have preferred to wait longer, but there was no more

time.

Dropping the shortsword to the ground and biting down on the Midnight Shard with his fangs, he grabbed the scorching metal with all four of his hands and endured the pain of the furious heat slowly spreading through the gauntlets to his bare skin. Then, Sunny set his foot on another bar, commanded all three shadows to wrap themselves around his body… and pulled.

Now that the cage was on the ground and stable, he could use all the muscles in his demonic body to put pressure on it, not just those in his arms. His core, his shoulders, his back, his powerful thighs and calf muscles, the entirety of his body worked in unison in order to bend the steel bars.

A stifled roar escaped from his mouth, washing over the blade of the austere tachi and echoing in the cold darkness.

Sunny pulled and pushed in opposite directions with all his monstrous strength. Already a demon and augmented by the three shadows, he was terrifyingly powerful. And yet, the incandescent bars refused to budge… for a few seconds, at least.

Then, when his muscles seemed to be on the verge of exploding from the inhuman strain, the metal finally gave in. With a metallic groan, one of the bars started to bend, slightly at first, and then more, and more…

'Yes!'

Elyas, however, did not seem to share Sunny's jubilation. Instead, he paled, a frightened expression appearing on his face. Without saying a word, the youth raised one hand, pointing to somewhere behind his partner's back.

"Th—the… the priest!"

And just then, Sunny felt a mighty shadow flying toward him from the edges of his shadow sense, growing closer and closer with harrowing speed.

'Damnation…'

The Ascended arrived a few seconds earlier than he should have!

Without turning around, Sunny pulled on the incandescent bar one last time, creating enough distance between it and the next one for the youth to squeeze through.

Then, he reached inside the cage, grabbed the young Awakened, and roughly pulled him through the narrow breach.

He already could hear the heavy steps behind him.

'Crap, crap, crap…'

Elyas stared into the darkness with eyes full of fear.

"Demon! Behi…"

Without letting him finish, Sunny forcefully pushed the youth away, then swiftly turned around, grabbing the Cruel Sight from the ground and catching the hilt of the Midnight Shard.

The warrior in a tattered red robe and worn leather armor was already upon him, the terrifying heavy blade cutting through the air with unthinkable speed. Sunny moved his weapons forward, trying to block the obliterating blow…

But his exhausted, wounded body seemed to have finally betrayed him. He swayed, missing the timing by a split second.

It looked like the tiniest of mistakes…

But one mistake was all it took.

His luck had run out.

The great blade of the mighty Ascended slid past Sunny's defenses… and hit him right in the neck.

The sharp metal sliced through his tough skin, his muscles, and his spine, emerging in a fountain of blood from the other side. Sunny felt terrifying pain spread through his whole being, and then the world suddenly spun.

...The head of the shadow demon flew high into the air, disbelief still frozen in his lightless eyes. It was as though it was screaming... as though it was trying to say something. To share a fatal revelation that had come a few moments too late.

That there was no escape.

...No escape except through death.

Elyas staggered, a stunned expression contorting his soft, youthful face.

"D—demon… you…"

In front of him, the legs of the decapitated demon buckled, and his towering body, still clad in bleak steel, fell heavily to its knees.

Just like that, his partner was gone.

His partner's nightmare was over.

The young man froze for a moment, then turned to the indifferent murderer, sorrow and wrath mixing in his hollow, tired, light-blue eyes.

"You… I'll kill…"

The priest of War remained silent, disinterested in the rambling of the young slave. He turned to Elyas and made a step forward, raising the monstrous blade once again.

It was all over.

…Or, perhaps, not. Because at that moment, the decapitated body suddenly stirred and attacked the indifferent slaughterer, the radiant blade of the Cruel Sight entering the man's abdomen while the tip of the Midnight Shard pierced his chest. At the same time, the tail of the dead demon shot over his shoulder, penetrating one of the red priest's eyes with the long steel spike.

Laying on the filthy stones a few meters away, Sunny's head observed it all with a terribly pained expression.

'Hurts… crap, dying really, really hurts!'

Yes, having your head separated from your body was not the most pleasant of experiences. In fact, it was probably one of the worst.

However, Sunny really needed that to have happened. This was the only method to get rid of the unbreakable slave collar he had managed to come up with. He had even considered chopping his head off himself, but came to the conclusion that his own strength was not going to be enough to overcome the durability of Bone Weave.

So, he had decided to try and use the might of an Ascended apostle of War instead. Death, indeed, was the only escape.

…In front of him, a river of blood flowed from the body of the taciturn Master. The red priest had lowered his guard, thinking that the shadow demon was dead, and received not one, but three whole fatal wounds as the result.

Honestly, he should have been more careful. The dead were often the most troublesome of enemies, after all.

As the body in the tattered red robe slowly toppled and fell to the ground, the headless body of the demon raised one hand, hooked a claw beneath the slave collar, and tore it off its severed neck.

The band of metal rang as it hit the floor.

…Sunny was not dead, of course, thanks to the [Undying] enchantment of his Transcendent armor. For as long as it was active, he would remain alive, and even in control of his body. This was the good part…

The bad part was that the enchantment was devouring his essence with an inconceivable speed, and in the next few seconds, when his reserves ran completely dry, Sunny was really going to die.

Before that happened…

The headless demon took a few unsteady steps forward, nonchalantly picked up its head, and awkwardly placed it on his neck. Then, he

approached Elyas and fell to his knees in front of the petrified youth.

'C—come on, fool! I don't have much time!'

Due to the fact that his mouth wasn't currently connected to his lungs, Sunny couldn't even growl to pull the young Awakened out of his stupor.

Luckily, Elyas shook it off himself, flinching and throwing his hands into the air to place them on both sides of Sunny's mutilated neck.

"Oh Lord… oh gods… oh Lord! Hold on, Demon!"

He activated his healing Ability, trying to make the cleanly severed head of the shadow creature attach itself back to the flat stump of his neck.

Sunny shuddered, overwhelmed by terrifying pain.

'How… how does it even makes sense?! Why am I in so much pain?! My brain isn't even connected to those nerves… argh! Curses! Damnation!'

For almost anyone else, recovering from having their head cut off would have been nearly impossible. However, Sunny was a bit special… because avoiding death was one of his specialties.

There were several factors that played to his advantage.

Firstly, the Midnight Shard had judged his current state dire enough to unlock the hidden well of power that its [Unbroken] enchantment granted him.

Secondly, his bones and his blood were transformed by Weaver's lineage, gifting him with inhuman tenacity. That was the reason why he had not bled out already, and why his body was capable of rapid healing. All those qualities were enhanced by the drop of Shadow God's ichor that Blood Weave had unceremoniously devoured, and then augmented ever further by the Midnight Shard.

And lastly, while [Undying] was rapidly consuming his reserves of shadow essence, Saint was out there in the darkness, slaying one

powerful Nightmare Creature after another. She was wielding the black odachi, whose [Soul Reaver] Ability transferred a portion of essence of all creatures slain by the Serpent in either its Soul Weapon or Soul Beast form.

So, with each mighty abomination Saint killed, Sunny received a considerable amount of essence, thus allowing him to keep the [Undying] enchantment active longer.

Was it going to be long enough for him to survive, though?

That was what he was going to find out…

Torturous seconds passed, with Elyas desperately trying to heal the harrowing wound, and Sunny desperately observing his reserves of shadow essence plummeting further and further. The rate with which the Undying Chain was eating through his essence was much, much faster than the rate with which Saint and Serpent replenished it.

He was only able to slow down the inevitable, not stop it.

His whole being was overwhelmed with agony and pain… but what else was new? Even though Sunny had never had his head chopped off before, he experienced similar tortures, if not worse.

There was almost no shadow essence left in his cores…

And then, there was none.

The [Undying] enchantment deactivated.

…But Sunny was still alive.

He moved his lips, and tentatively touched his neck, which had a ghastly scar running all around it now.

Then, he bent over and spat out a torrent of blood.

Sunny felt terrible. He felt like a zombie...

But he was not dead.

More than that, he was now truly, really free…

# Chapter-621: Path to Freedom

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then hissed quietly, which made it feel as though his throat was being sawed open by tens of dull, rusty knives. His head was once again attached to his neck… however, that didn't mean that he felt fine.

In fact, although he had avoided becoming a corpse, he still felt like one.

[...Your shadow grows stronger.]

The dark dungeon suddenly grew silent. Saint must have finished off the last of the caged Nightmare Creatures, turning him and Elyas into the last surviving captives of the Red Colosseum. No matter what happened from now on, the ghastly Trials were over, finished before time by her hand.

Sunny sensed a bit of shadow essence pour into his cores, replenishing the empty reserves a little, and scowled.

That wasn't much… the young Awakened had wasted all of his essence while healing Sunny, as well. The two of them were not going to survive if they had to fight a prolonged battle.

So, they needed to flee the Colosseum swiftly and before the rest of the Warmongers noticed their escape.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny staggered and rose to his feet, then threw a somber glance at Elyas, who was staring at him with wide eyes.

The youth still had a collar wrapped around his neck. However, there was not much Sunny could do about that right now — it was not like he could behead the young Awakened, too. Hopefully, his strength alone was going to be enough to deliver them both away from this cursed place.

Now that he was connected to the Spell and had access to all of his power, there were a lot of things that could be done. The damned zealots were going to regret ever capturing him...

Elyas opened his mouth, then asked in a shaking voice:

"Demon… how? How are you still alive?"

Sunny tilted his head, grimaced, and decided to not move his neck too much in the future. Then, he gestured at the breastplate of the Undying Chain.

The young Awakened frowned.

"Your… your armor? It's a relic? Wait… where did you even get this fearsome armor?! And all these magical weapons?!"

Sunny sighed, then nodded and pointed at his chest again.

Elyas blinked a couple of times.

"What do you mean, they were inside of you all along? Why have you not used them in the arena, then?"

One of the demon's hands rose and pointed at the collar that now lay harmlessly on the filthy stones.

The youth frowned:

"Oh… I see. The War God's binding must have hidden you from the sight of the Lord of Shadows, and robbed you of his blessings. But then…"

Sunny sighed, and pressed a finger against his lips, commanding Elyas to be quiet. At the same time, Saint appeared from the darkness, drops of fetid black blood still dripping from the blade of the great odachi. Her gaze was calm and indifferent, as always.

The youth stared at the taciturn demon for a few moments, then bowed respectfully.

"You… you have my gratitude for coming to our aid, v—venerable

lady Shade!"

Saint looked at the young man without showing any sign of having an opinion on being addressed in such a peculiar manner.

'Poor fool must be thinking that she is another shadow creature that came to rescue her kin… me, that is. And judging by this reaction, he also seems to be convinced that she is my senior in the hierarchy of Shadows… what the hell, why are teenagers always convinced that Saint is cooler than me?!'

He was in no mood to disabuse the youth of this misconception, though. Plus, there was no time…

A scorched kite shield manifested itself from sparks of light in Saint's hand, and at the same time, the Soul Serpent turned into a stream of flowing darkness and reformed itself into a straight double-edged sword, this one akin to the weapon the graceful knight had wielded in the past.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then pushed the hilt of the Midnight Shard into Elyas's hands. Holding the Cruel Sight in one of his own, he bent down and picked up the terrifying heavy blade of the red priest with the upper pair.

Sunny didn't know what enchantments exactly the two-handed cleaver possessed, but since it had managed to slice through his adamantine spine without too much trouble, they had to be exceptionally powerful.

Then, he took a deep breath… and sent his shadows forth, along the familiar corridors of the underground part of the Colosseum and beyond them, to find a way to freedom.

Sunny was good enough in a fight to survive in the arena, and even earn the love and admiration of the damned lunatics who spectated the slaughter and worshipped it… but his true calling was to remain hidden in the darkness, move unseen, and strike at unsuspecting enemies from the shadows to kill them in one fell blow.

The task of escaping the Red Colosseum unnoticed was much easier

for him than that of conquering it.

As all three shadows glided into the darkness, the skin of the four-armed demon he inhabited turned from obsidian black to pale grey once again, and Sunny swayed, sensing his strength and resilience vastly diminish.

He gritted his teeth, and then gestured for Elyas to follow.

While Saint disappeared into the darkness, the two of them headed toward the exit from the dungeon.

They walked through the silent corridors, sensing the cold wind blow past, washing the stench of the dungeon off their aching bodies. Since it was night and the battles were not supposed to continue until the morning, the Colosseum was mostly empty, devoid of the jubilant crowds that filled it during the day.

Here and there, Sunny and Elyas still encountered the Warmongers — those who, perhaps, had duties to maintain, clean, and prepare the arena for the next day's slaughter. However, everyone they saw had already met Saint.

Following in the wake of the taciturn demon, the two of them found only corpses. The followers of War had been killed ruthlessly and noiselessly, each requiring just one strike.

With each death, Sunny's reserves of essence were replenished a bit more. But more importantly than that...

The path to freedom was clear.

Finally, after something that felt like an eternity, Sunny found his three shadows waiting silently before a small wooden door.

He lingered for a second, and then pushed it open.

In front of him, there was a vast green meadow, and beyond it…

Nothing but boundless, vast, starlit sky.

# Chapter-622: Wooden Sword

The dawn was approaching, which meant that they didn't have a lot of time left. Sunny and Elyas had to leave the cursed island of the Red Colosseum before the night ended and the crowds of War God worshippers arrived to spectate the sacrificial slaughter on the bloodsoaked arena.

Once they were elsewhere, pursuing them would become much harder — not only because the ancient magic of the Demon of Desire would remain far behind them, but also because the Warmongers would have to split their forces to search all the neighboring isles. The further the two of them escaped, the wider net their pursuers would have to throw.

By then, the zealots would have to deal with the Crushing, as well.

Sunny wasn't familiar with the western reaches of the Chained Isles, which belonged to the followers of War, since he had never traveled in this direction before. They could try to escape northeast, toward the Hollow Mountains and the Night Temple, but that region was unfamiliar to him, as well.

Directly to the east, a long distance away, lay the Ivory City where Elyas hailed from, and the prison of Hope. However, the eastern direction would be where the pursuers were most likely to concentrate their search, since running toward the domain of their enemies, the Sun God's people, would have been the safest choice.

After hesitating for a few seconds, Sunny pulled the young Awakened toward the southern edge of the Red Island. If they journey southeast, they would eventually reach the ruined fortress… well, it might not have been ruined yet… where he had once welcomed Effie and Kai. There, the influence of the War faction was bound to be severely diminished.

More importantly, that was the boundary to the part of Hope's shattered kingdom that Sunny knew and had explored before.

Before the start of the Nightmare, he and the other members of the cohort had agreed to travel to the Iron Hand island should they be separated. Sunny would be able to easily find his way there from the southern Great Chain that anchored the Isles to the mainland beneath.

Hidden in the darkness, Sunny and Elyas ran across the meadow, aiming to reach the edge of the island and one of the heavenly chains that rattled below from time to time, disturbed by the turbulent winds of the border between the two skies.

'Come on… come on…'

Once they were over the edge, Sunny could summon the Heavenly Burden and the Dark Wing to carry them to the chain, or even hide them in the darkness of the Sky Below for a while.

Their salvation was so close! It was already just a few meters away...

But then, his heart suddenly grew cold.

'No…'

...In the end, it wasn't close enough.

Just as they reached the edge, a quiet sigh resounded from the darkness, and suddenly, Sunny was laying on the ground, his vision blurred and his whole body numb.

There was no oxygen in his lungs, and no matter how hard he tried to inhale, it was of no use. His chest seemed to be on fire.

A few seconds of agony later, the shock of the terrifying impact that had cracked the breastplate of the Undying Chain and sent him flying to the ground began to fade, and Sunny was able to finally draw in a hoarse, desperate breath.

'C… curses…'

He moved his arm, reaching for the hilt of the red priest's cleaver that lay near, buried in the soft grass.

However, before his fingers closed around it, a delicate foot stepped on his wrist, and suddenly, it was as though the weight of a whole world descended upon him.

Sunny groaned, then gritted his teeth and looked up at the harrowing creature that had attacked them from beyond the edge of the island.

It was a graceful, breathtaking beauty wearing a simple red tunic, her face tender and solemn, her dazzling eyes shining like two silver stars.

Solvane looked down at him and smiled with sadness.

"I am afraid that this is as far as you go… ah, we meet again, child of shadows!"

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Sunny stared at the beautiful Saint with grim resentment burning in his black, tenebrous eyes. He remained motionless, knowing that his worst fear had just come true…

The Transcendent Immortal herself had arrived to hunt them down.

He thought feverishly, trying to come up with some way to escape the Priestess of War… Soul Serpent and Saint were still hiding in his shadow, so he could command them to attack.

But what could an Awakened and an Ascended Demon do against a Transcendent? An undying one that was chosen by the gods and had lived for at least a thousand years, no less… no, sending them to fight that horror would be just sending them to their deaths.

In all of his travels, Sunny had never met a creature more frightening than Solvane. Of that, he was sure. Even the Corrupted leviathans of the Dark Sea had not instilled such caution in him. Maybe only the harrowing rot in the Ebony Tower had, but he hesitated to call it a living being.

Then… what? What he was supposed to do?!

'Damn you… damn you, fate! You never let go of your prey, do you?!'

Sunny gritted his teeth, then growled, and tried to strike at Solvane with the Cruel Sight. However, the beautiful woman simply swatted it away, breaking his fingers and sending the somber blade flying over the edge of the island.

She shook her head.

"No… not like that, little demon. You deserve a better end…"

Then, Sunny felt himself being lifted into the air, and then thrown to his knees. A moment later, a stifled scream announced that Elyas, too, had not escaped the immortal Transcendent. His gaunt figure fell near him, a pained grimace contorting the young man's young face.

Soon, the unassailable power that pressed Sunny into the ground disappeared, and he was able to breathe again.

Looking up, he saw Solvane standing in front of them, her silken skin caressed by the gentle starlight. She looked at them with an inexplicable expression, her long chestnut hair dancing softly in the wind.

'There has to be something I can do… think, think!'

The Transcendent priestess smiled, the world itself growing brighter from her mesmerizing smile.

"Ah… the Trials of Life are over! I congratulate you, champions. Although some of your foes were vanquished under the cover of darkness instead of in the bright light of day, under the gaze of the gods, you have defeated them nevertheless. You have even slain one of my blessed. Thank you! Thank you for giving that which I was unable to… you have my gratitude.

Both of you..."

Sunny stared at the beautiful Saint, frozen in place. Despite all the hatred he harbored against the monstrous priestess, despite how

much he wanted to pay her back a hundredfold for all the suffering she had caused him… he couldn't help but forget his anger, and be enchanted by her beauty.

Solvane was just too splendid, too lovely… her eyes were too lustrous, her smile too charming, her soft lips too alluring. This woman was created to be worshipped… for men to wage wars in hope of earning the right to stand by her side…

'Snap out of it, idiot! Have you not seen beautiful things before?! Beautiful things are always the deadliest!'

Sunny bit his lip, allowing his sharp fangs to pierce it. Pain sobered him up somewhat.

Beside him, Elyas was staring at Solvane with grim eyes… strangely, the young man did not seem to be affected by her transcendent beauty at all.

It was understandable. After all, his whole family had been slaughtered by the followers and on the orders of the dazzling priestess.

…Meanwhile, something appeared in Solvane's hands. It was a small object that made Sunny's eyes narrow suddenly, and his breathing become quicker.

The Saint sighed and stretched her hand forward, a simple knife carved out of a single piece of wood laying on her open palm.

"...The Trials of Life are over, and so, I offer you this gift, and the right to fight for your freedom. To struggle for your life, as life is an eternal struggle. Will you accept, champions? Will you take this wooden blade and wield it? It… it is all I can give you…"

Sunny's heart skipped a beat.

'I'll… be damned…'

The fairy tale about a wooden sword Elyas had once shared with him had actually, inexplicably, turned out to be true.

…And more than that, Sunny recognized the "sword" instantly.

He had already held that wooden knife once, a long time ago… far, far in the future.

This was the knife he had killed Solvane with.

# Chapter-623: Ardent Desire

Sunny stared at the wooden knife, suffocating pain still radiating from the spot where Solvane had hit him. The Transcendent was so fast that he had not even seen or sensed her strike… not that it mattered anymore.

As he studied the familiar blade, different pieces of knowledge suddenly clicked together, revealing a chilling truth. Stunned by the grim revelation, Sunny shuddered.

'Of course…'

Finally, the purpose of the Red Colosseum made sense to him. The cruelty of the Trials, the perverse faith of the zealous warriors, their worship of struggle, battle, and death… the tale of a wooden blade that granted the champion a chance to win their freedom.

When he looked back, it all seemed so obvious.

The strange cult of War that had blossomed on the ruins of the Kingdom of Hope was built around the tenet of glory. Glory was both the highest virtue and the highest of honors, and it could only be won by prevailing against overwhelming odds, through mortal struggle — which was the essence of life, and war, as far as these zealots were concerned.

So, they enslaved a horde of abominations and threw themselves against it, fighting to the death against their slaves in the arena. With each battle, the weak were slaughtered, and the strong got to live and fight against more powerful enemies the next day. All under the beaming gazes of the jubilant crowd.

Those who died perished in the pursuit of glory, and those who lived came closer and closer to earning it… that was the sacrificial ritual the followers of War performed every decade or so, spilling blood in

the name of their glorious dream.

…However, there was one problem with this demented arrangement. A glaring flaw that made the Trials of the Red Colosseum seem futile, hollow, and senseless.

What was the end of all this?

Was everyone participating in the battle destined to die? Would there be no victor? What happened to the person, or creature, left standing at the very end, devoid of enemies to struggle against? Where was their glory?

Now, looking at the wooden knife that contained Solvane's death, freely offered to them by the immortal Transcendent herself, Sunny finally understood everything.

That last champion would indeed be gifted a wooden blade, and a chance to fight for their freedom — just like Elyas had learned from the fairy tales in the Ivory City. They just had to overcome one last enemy...

To fight against Solvane herself.

This whole feverish hell — the Red Colosseum, the bloodsoaked arena, the cult of murderous glory she had built — existed for one single purpose. To find, or rather create, a warrior capable of killing their Saint.

Eternal Solvane… undefeated Solvane... wanted to die. The madness of this nightmare was born out of the thousand years of immortality the beautiful priestess had endured, out of the desire to be free of her eternal duty as Hope's warden.

…However, Solvane didn't just want to die. She wanted to die a glorious death, one worthy of a true servant of War. Or rather, she simply could not allow herself to give up. Giving up without struggle was a sin against her faith, her god, and her conviction.

So the beautiful Transcendent could only allow herself to die if she was defeated. That was her goal…

Finding someone valiant enough to kill her was Solvane's most ardent hope. Her deepest desire.

Feeling a hint of vague suspicion, Sunny frowned. He was certain that he was right, that his reasoning and insight were correct... but at the same time, there was still something out of place. Something still didn't make sense… he just couldn't say what.

And there was no time to think.

Solvane was still offering them the wooden knife and a chance to save their lives. All they had to do was to take it… and win.

But he wasn't fooled.

Her offer might have seemed like a gift, but it was just a death sentence. Sure, the knife contained a death… Solvane's death… and would be able to slay her with one strike. At this point, Sunny was certain that there had been seven knives once, each meant to kill one of the seven immortals created by the Lord of Light. And this one, the wooden knife, was meant to kill Solvane.

However, taking it was only going to spell their doom.

Wooden blade or not, the beautiful priestess was still a Transcendent. A servant of War with a thousand years of battle experience, an ancient warrior who had fought and triumphed in battles too many to count. And despite her desire to be defeated, she would not throw this fight. Giving in without struggling with all her might was against Solvane's conviction.

Fighting against her was suicide.

By his side, Elyas's pupils widened dangerously.

Feeling a small change in his partner's posture, Sunny shifted and glanced at him.

'What… what is this fool trying to do?'

The youth gritted his teeth, and then slowly rose to his feet. His tattered tunic had long ago lost any remnant of its once pure white

color, and was now hanging like rags on his gaunt, emaciated body. Despite that, the young Awakened looked full of resolve and determination, his eyes glinting with grim purpose.

'What are you doing? No! You fool!'

Despite the pain in his throat, Sunny growled loudly, trying to warn Elyas of how fatal his actions were. But his call fell on deaf ears.

'Damn! Damn it! Why, why can't I talk?!'

For the first time since he had entered the Nightmare, Sunny felt really desperate to speak. But he couldn't... the demon's body robbed him of the ability to converse with humans in any meaningful way.

Panicking, he made a motion to stand up, hoping to grab the youth before the fool made a lethal mistake. But the pressure Solvane had exerted on him was back, paralyzing the body of the four-armed shadow creature. He groaned, suddenly unable to move, and struggled to even keep his head up.

# Chapter-624: A New Day

Elyas hesitated for a moment, and then looked at Sunny with a sad smile.

"It's… it's alright, Demon. Thank you... thank you for getting us this far. But now, it is my turn. This is our chance. This is what we've been fighting for all this time, is it not?

The tales my mother told me were all true… I'll free us both! You'll see. The Lord of Light will guide my hand…"

With that, he reached out and took the wooden knife from Solvane's hand, his fingers wrapping tightly around its hilt.

The priestess smiled radiantly and took a step back. Her beautiful eyes shone with joy, and her voice resounded in the darkness of the dying night, full of longing and hope:

"Be brave, boy. The gods are watching!"

Sunny struggled desperately against the crushing force that pressed him into the ground, but it was of no use. A stifled roar escaped from his mouth…

A few steps away, Elyas straightened, calmly looked the Transcendent beauty in the eyes, and then assumed a battle stance. He knew what he was doing, after all… the youth was as talented of a fighter as Sunny had been at his age, or maybe even better.

Two months of constant battles in the arena gave him plenty of experience. More than most would have acquired in a lifetime, and certainly no less than what Sunny had on the Forgotten Shore.

'No! That is not enough!'

But what if... what if Elyas really had a chance? Sunny had achieved many impossible things himself, as well, and seen others do the same.

Even in the direst of situations, there was always hope... that was a lesson he had learned against all odds in the hell of the Forgotten Shore, and later in the stone mausoleum of the Night Temple.

…Without wasting any time on doubt and hesitation, Elyas sent his soul essence flowing in a raging flood, and shot forward, moving with grace and speed that few Awakened could ever hope to achieve. His hand flew through the air, swift enough to appear as an almost imperceptible blur.

The strike was swift and cunning... however, it was just a feint. His true intention was to attack from below, and it was hidden almost perfectly. There was no sign of the fact that the young man was preparing to change the direction of the blow. He had learned well from watching Sunny fight...

But if Sunny could see it, then so could Solvane.

His eyes narrowed.

A split second before the wooden knife reached the Transcendent's flesh, Elyas suddenly stumbled, then slowed down. Taking a few unsteady steps forward, he swayed, and suddenly toppled to the ground.

A thin red line appeared across his chest, and then burst open in a flood of blood.

Above him, Solvane sighed with sorrow and lowered her hand, a single drop of crimson falling from her delicate fingers. Her lips trembled, and then, a barely audible whisper reached Sunny's ears.

"...Not today."

He didn't hear it, though. Frozen, Sunny stared at Elyas, who lay motionlessly on the ground, the grass soaking in his blood. The young man's unmoving face was turned to him, his light-blue eyes still open. However, those eyes, which had been bright and lively once, were now dull and empty, reflecting the boundless darkness of the night

sky. Elyas's face seemed almost... peaceful.

The youth was finally free.

...Sunny roared, struggling furiously to stand up, but all he achieved was damaging his mangled body even further. Without paying any attention to that pain, he continued fighting against the invisible chains holding him down, feeling the ground itself shift beneath his knees.

'Kill! I'll kill her! I'll rip her to shreds!'

Solvane remained motionless for a while, and then silently bent down to pick up the wooden knife from the youth's bloodless fingers.

Coming closer, she stared at Sunny with a dark expression, and then asked:

"What about you? Are you willing to fight me, little demon?"

Sunny glared at her, his teeth bared in a hateful grin. He wanted to... oh, how he wanted to!

But he could not. Fighting Solvane meant nothing but death...

Slowly, he shook his head.

The beautiful priestess sighed.

"...Of course. Why did I expect different from the servant of cowardly Shadow?"

Her hand suddenly flashed, and terrible pain exploded through Sunny's body.

Looking down, in a morbid deja vu, he saw a graceful arm protruding from his chest, the breastplate of the Undying Chain shattered into pieces.

Solvane grimaced, and pulled her hand out of his broken chest, easily tearing the still-beating heart out in the process. She glanced at it with disappointment, and then sent the body of the four-armed

demon tumbling over the edge of the island.

The last thing he saw before plummeting into the abyss was her graceful, beautiful figure standing forlornly in the tall grass.

Then, Sunny fell into the embrace of darkness.

His body flew down, faster and faster, quickly disappearing into the nothingness of the Sky Below.

Soon, it was so far away from the Red Island that even a memory of sunlight couldn't reach that far.

His chest was torn open, and his heart was violently ripped from it, leaving behind a harrowing wound.

...After falling for a while, Sunny sighed.

Luckily, this strange body of his had two hearts. And while anyone else would have succumbed to blood loss after having one destroyed, he possessed Blood Weave, which kept him alive despite receiving such a ghastly wound.

It didn't feel too good, though. In fact, the pain was terrible.

But it could not compare even a little to the anguish he felt in his soul.

Sunny closed his eyes.

'I'm sorry, Elyas. I failed. But... don't worry. I'll kill her on your behalf, one day… kill her again. I'll kill her as many times as it takes to erase the very memory of her from existence.

Just you wait…'

He gritted his teeth, then summoned the Heavenly Burden, and then thrust the black needle into his flesh.

Dark Wing appeared on his shoulders, swiftly turning into a blur.

Sunny's fall slowed, then slowed some more, and finally turned into

flight.

He was flying into the darkness, moving further and further away from the Red Colosseum…

Far above, the eastern horizon had already turned pale lilac, announcing the arrival of a new day.

# Chapter-625: Comfortably Numb

Eventually, Sunny returned to the altitude where the dark undersides of the floating islands could be seen. He tiredly approached one, sensed something moving in the deep shadows, and glided past without coming too close.

The next one didn't seem to harbor any horrors. He flew toward the rough stone surface and sunk his claws and talons into it, clinging to the bottom of the island like a bat. Strangely, Sunny did not need to exert any conscious effort to remain in that position, and simply lay upside down on the cold stones for a while, struggling against exhaustion.

He was in much worse shape than it had seemed before. Two months of ruthless battles in the Red Colosseum had taken a toll on his body, and the terrible wound in his chest was still there, sapping him of strength and vitality.

With the help of Blood Weave, the body of the four-armed demon managed to survive having one of its two hearts violently torn out. But that didn't mean that it was going to fully recover from that vicious injury… with only one heart left to pump blood through his veins, Sunny felt lethargic and weak.

That weakness would probably never go away, not unless he somehow managed to find or grow a new heart.

He was tired to the bone, overwhelmed by pain, and numb. Terribly, utterly numb. After the harrowing intensity of the past two months and the crushing strain of their disastrous attempt to escape, Sunny finally reached safety, and found himself drained of all thoughts and emotions.

He couldn't muster enough energy to feel joy or relief, grief or sorrow… even anger or hatred.

Tired… he was just too tired.

The island under which Sunny hid was separated from the Red Colosseum by four or five heavenly chains, far to the south. He was still deep within the territory of the followers of War, but no one was going to discover him, not unless they had wings… and even then, finding the Child of Shadows in the cold embrace of darkness was not going to be easy.

However, no one was looking. After all, he was considered to be dead.

Sunny looked at the shattered breastplate of the Undying Chain, and then dismissed the damaged armor to give it a chance to repair itself. Then, he summoned the Mantle of Underworld and gasped when its onyx metal wrapped itself around his mangled chest.

The intricate black armor embraced his tortured body, soothing its aches. Sunny doubted that anyone from the real world would be able to spy on him here, in the depths of a Nightmare… but even if they could, he didn't care anymore. He just wanted to be safe and protected.

As soon as the fearsome Mantle hid his wounds, Sunny tiredly closed his eyes… and plunged into the nothingness of a deep, dreamless sleep.

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Thirst… and pain.

Those were the first things Sunny felt before slowly remembering who he was, what he was, and where he had found himself.

...He was in hell. Where else?

'I fell asleep…'

He opened his eyes and saw the rough surface of the bare stone in front of him. Sunny was still clinging to the underside of the island, his claws buried deep into it and holding him in place like iron pitons.

He felt… better, somewhat. His body was still a labyrinth of pain, but it was much milder than before. Judging by the state of his wounds, he had slept for many, many days.

No wonder he was so thirsty.

Sunny shifted slightly and freed one of his four hands, then summoned the Endless Spring and drank a few gulps of water. Then, he turned his head and stared into the darkness, indifferent to everything.

His body was healing, but his mind was still empty and numb, exhausted of its ability to feel anything. All that remained was cold rationality, but even that part of him was dull and apathetic, devoid of any interest and desire.

He just didn't care about anything, or anyone, right now. The mere thought of caring seemed exhausting.

After a while, Sunny sighed.

'...What should I do?'

Despite everything that had happened, his immediate goal remained simple and straightforward. He had to traverse the whole Kingdom of Hope and reach the Iron Hand island to regroup with the cohort. Once they were together… if the others were still alive… they would know what to do.

Sunny didn't feel particularly motivated to attempt the perilous journey, but he knew that he had to. It was a simple enough objective, at least… in his current state, he felt reluctant to think about anything arduous, obtuse, or complicated.

All he had to do was to move southeast for a while, and then turn north. Maybe his condition would improve by the time he reached the eastern edges of the Chained Isles.

The road, however, was not going to be easy.

Sunny was going to have to sneak through the vast territory of the Warmongers without being seen, reach the southernmost boundary of

the region, and then retrace the path he had taken to welcome Effie and Kai almost all the way back to the Sanctuary of Noctis.

It was also unclear who ruled the eastern territories in this era, or if they were wild and overrun by Nightmare Creatures, like they would be in the future.

He grimaced, remained motionless for a while, and then summoned the Covetous Coffer.

Catching the frightened box before it plummeted into the Sky Below, Sunny freed one more hand and took a handful of synthpaste tubes out of the Coffer, then dismissed it. Consuming the tasteless sludge to replenish his strength, he summoned the runes and finally took a proper look at them for the first time in months:

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Awakened.

Class: Demon.

Shadow Cores: [3/7].

Shadow Fragments: …

His pupils narrowed.

'...What?'

But there was no mistake. The runes read:

Shadow Fragments: [2223/3000].

Sunny stared at the number, then hung his head back and tried to chuckle, producing a disturbing bestial snarl instead. His throat pulsed with sharp pain, but he shrugged it off and bared his teeth in a dark, bitter grin.

When entering the Nightmare, Sunny had less than three hundred

fragments collected… which meant that he had accumulated almost two thousand of them in the Red Colosseum.

In fact, in those two months, he had probably slaughtered more Nightmare Creatures… and humans… than in the previous two years, his whole life as a carrier of the Spell.

…Was this the price of glory?

# Chapter-626: Hiding in the Dark

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then shifted his gaze, moving it to the very end of the field of shimmering runes. Soon, Neph's description appeared before him. He lingered for a few moments, and then read:

…Soul Fragments: [2478/4000].

The corner of his mouth twitched.

'Of course. She is in a hell of her own, after all…'

The gap between them had diminished, but barely. He was still behind… still lacking…

But she was alive, at least. And fighting with all her strength to return.

If Neph refused to give up, then he would have to persevere, too.

With a sigh, Sunny turned away and looked back to his runes, finding the list of his Memories and Echoes. His eyes suddenly gleamed, but then grew dark and slightly despondent.

'What the hell… how is this even possible…'

Among the names of his Memories, dozens of new ones shimmered in the darkness. It seemed that the Spell continued to reward him even while their connection was obstructed by the sorceries of Hope. It sort of made sense… the fact that Sunny had not been able to communicate with the Spell did not mean that it had not continued to watch his every step.

He was inside one of its Nightmares, after all. Which created a swarm of questions on its own…

Not caring to consider them, Sunny silently counted the new Memories.

Thirty-nine… there were thirty-nine of them!

…And yet, there was not a single Echo he had received after slaughtering nearly a thousand Nightmare Creatures. Not even a hint of one.

'Doesn't make any sense… none at all. What is this, a joke?'

It seemed that his luck when it came to Memories had been incredible, while his luck when it came to Echoes had been beyond terrible. He should have received four or five, at least… but he had not.

Sunny stared into the darkness for a while, his expression glum. Then, he sighed.

'Well, doesn't matter. It's a pity that I did not receive an Echo of the Red Priest, though. I would have made him into a Shadow... just to get a chance to kill that bastard again…'

He studied his new Memories, slowly reading their names and descriptions. A few were good, and a couple were splendid. The rest, however, were worse than what he already had in his arsenal. Their only use was to feed Saint.

This time, however, he did not hurry to give them away as sustenance for the taciturn demon. Instead, Sunny hesitated for a long time, and then dismissed the runes. He had other plans for these Memories.

Each of them possessed a unique weave, one that he would be able to study and experiment with while not fearing to damage or destroy an actually valuable instrument. He would be able to use Weaver's needle now, too, instead of cutting his fingers on the ethereal, but perfectly sharp strings.

Satisfied with that decision, Sunny finished the last of synthpaste tubes he had taken out of the Covetous Coffer, indifferently dropped them into the dark abyss of the Sky Below, and sent one of his

shadows to scout out the situation above.

The sun was rolling toward the horizon, and the night was swiftly approaching.

That meant that he would have to move soon.

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Over the next few days, Sunny traveled southeast, staying in the darkness of the Sky Below during the night, and finding shelter on the undersides of the floating island during the day. He was still weak because of his injuries and had to make frequent stops to rest and sleep, which slowed him down considerably.

In the course of these days, Sunny made several stunning discoveries.

The first one was rather pleasant and beneficial to him. As it turned out, there were far fewer Nightmare Creatures populating the Kingdom of Hope in this era than there were in the future. That included the harrowing abominations that dwelled on the dark side of the islands.

Their absence made the task of remaining below the isles far easier for him. Of course, there were still some monstrosities hiding in the darkness, but not nearly enough to make it too hard to avoid them.

In retrospect, that made sense. These lands were not completely devastated yet, and there were plenty of humans living on the levitating islands. It was because of them and their efforts that the population of Nightmare Creatures was so low. It was also the reason why it took Solvane and her zealots a full decade or more to gather enough abominations to hold the accursed Trials.

The second discovery he made was far less fortuitous, and also had to do with the human inhabitants of the Kingdom of Hope. He was still in the territory of the worshippers of War, which made it all but impossible to appear on the surface of the islands during the day, unnoticed. But the dark side wasn't completely safe, either.

Not once and not twice, he saw humans traveling either across the heavenly chains or through the Sky Below. Hidden in the shadows,

he observed several flying ships sail through the boundless darkness, some adorned with sails of pristine white, some of vivid red.

He even witnessed two vessels locked in furious battle, arrows and pieces of burning wood falling into the abyss like rain. In the end, the ship with white sails rammed into the red one, splitting the vessel in half and sending the captain and the crew to their deaths in the Sky Below.

These ships looked simultaneously similar and different to the one the Fire Keepers had repaired and guided to the Ebony Tower. They were much smaller and slower, and didn't have a magnificent tree growing around their masts. The vessel Sunny had spent several weeks on looked much more... ancient, in comparison.

Like the original in front of lesser copies.

…The third discovery Sunny made was, perhaps, the most shocking.

The Crushing... did not exist in this era. The islands rose and fell as usual, but no matter how high they climbed, no deadly force assaulted them, threatening to destroy anything too weak or too slow to run away.

Many of the Nightmare Creatures Sunny had studied before hunting them down, in the future, were somewhat different here from what he knew. He had understood that fact in the arena, and confirmed it while observing the islands through the eyes of his shadows after escaping it.

Now, he learned why. The Crushing did not yet exist, and for that reason, the Nightmare Creatures had not gone through thousands of years of adaptation to learn how to survive its burden. Neither their bodies nor their behavior changed to accommodate the deadly force that would terrorize the entire region in the future yet, and that was why he had found them to be both familiar and strange.

Armed with that knowledge, Sunny slowly made his way south, leaving the Red Colosseum — and Saint Solvane — further and further behind.

His wounds slowly healed, and soon, he felt that he would not be entirely useless in the fight anymore.

…That was just in time, because his days of peace were about to come to an end.

# Chapter-627: Needlework

It took Sunny almost two weeks to approach the southern boundary of the Chained Isles. The further from the Red Colosseum he went, the less presence the Warmongers had there.

With Solvane's militant order occupying the western reaches of the Kingdom of Hope and the followers of Sun God in control of its center, engaged in a centuries-old conflict with each other, the south remained desolate and neglected. That made Sunny's life a bit easier, but also caused him to lower his guard a little.

He still had to remain vigilant, though, because there were more and more unsightly horrors hiding in the deep shadows of the Dark Side as he traveled away from human settlements.

On one of these days, Sunny found himself clinging to the underside of a small floating island as he waited for the arrival of night. He had already rested and dined on several tubes of synthpaste, so for now, there was nothing much for him to do.

As had been his habit for the past week or so, he summoned one of the Memories from the Colosseum and studied its weave, trying to peer into the secrets of the complicated pattern of ethereal strings.

Armed with his innate intuition and the ability to compare different Memories to each other, he was making torturously slow progress in his understanding of sorcery… or at least of this type of it. Weaver's sorcery seemed elegant, strange, and marvelous… but also inhumanly complex and elaborate.

Sunny doubted that he would be able to comprehend its foundational principles any time soon. And even if he did, his human mind was simply unable to encompass the whole of the infinitely convoluted patterns, let alone create one from scratch.

Maybe if he had a powerful supercomputer instead of a brain… in any case, he was not going to be creating his own Memories just yet, or maybe ever.

That didn't mean that he couldn't do anything, though.

Sunny might not have had the capacity to create new weaves, but he had already proven his ability to copy those that already existed. He had reproduced the simplest and most common of them — the pattern responsible for storing Memories in his soul and then summoning them back through essence — in the dungeon of the Red Colosseum.

With enough time and preparation, he would be able to copy other enchantments of the familiar weaves, too. Creating anything meaningful was going to take a while, though… but that was not what Sunny was currently trying to achieve.

Instead, he wanted to expand his sorcerous repertoire from one trick... to no less than two tricks. He was experimenting with his Memories in hopes of learning how to modify and change an existing enchantment.

Right now, Sunny was holding a slim dagger in one hand and a small silver bell in the other.

The Silver Bell was the first Memory he had ever received, and also the simplest, while the slim dagger was one of the weapons he had won in the arena. Its enchantment was rather straightforward — it made the weapon utterly noiseless. It didn't ring when struck against armor or another blade, and didn't even rustle as it entered the enemy's flesh.

Sunny had chosen these two Memories for the experiment because, at the core, their enchantments were very similar. One was that of sound amplification, while the other was that of sound nullification. He wanted to change the latter into the former.

In other words, he wanted to turn the silent dagger into a very noisy dagger. Not because that would be very useful, but to prove that he was capable of modifying enchantments.

After studying the spellweave of the Silver Bell for many days, Sunny was close to memorizing the staggering complexity of the pattern of strings entirely. Since the bell had only one enchantment, it was easy to isolate it from the parts of the pattern that were common to all Memories. So, in theory, he knew what shape to create.

The dagger, on the other hand, was a bit different. It also only had a single enchantment and a single ember anchoring the pattern, but that ember was brighter, and the pattern itself was much larger and more intricate. However, there were certain similarities with the one in the bell… so, Sunny could imagine turning one into another.

He hesitated for a while, then sighed, and raised Weaver's needle. Just like on the day he had found it, the long and narrow needle was enveloped in a faint, weak golden shine that only he could see… thousands of years ago, or maybe sometime in the future, it had absorbed some of Weaver's deific blood, along with tiny traces of divinity.

Sunny suspected that the needle had not been a magical tool, and neither had it actually belonged to Weaver. Rather, it had been just a random needle that the Demon of Fate found in the Ebony Tower and made use of to sew a new arm to their body, and its magical properties came from being washed in the daemon's blood.

…However, now, the needle did possess magical properties. Just like Sunny's fingers, it was capable of interacting with the ephemeral strings that constituted spellweaves.

Sunny threaded a shadow string through the needle, and carefully thrust it into the sorcerous pattern that created the enchantment of the silent dagger. He was hoping to replace some of the existing strings with his own, shift others around, and remove some completely.

At first, everything went well. Sunny was on the verge of getting excited… but then, the same thing that happened with all his previous experiments repeated itself.

At some point, the strings trembled, and then the whole pattern tore and collapsed, turning into a chaotic mess of ripped and fluttering

threads. Sunny hurriedly retracted his hand, afraid to lose it, and watched as the slim dagger shimmered and disintegrated into a rain of dim sparks.

A few moments later, the Spell spoke solemnly:

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

Sunny grimaced and closed his eyes.

"Damnation! Another one..."

Then, however, he suddenly shifted and turned his head up, staring at the stone surface above him as if trying to pierce its solid mass with his gaze.

Up above, on the surface of the small island, one of his shadows had noticed movement.

# Chapter-628: From the Dark Side

The grass covering the surface of the island moved, and strange shapes appeared from beneath it. Some were similar to each other, while some were not, but all shared the same deep emerald color. The shapes levitated upward, slowly coalescing together.

The creepy shadow observed the eerie event from the shade of a large boulder, darkly excited. Sunny only understood what it was so excited about when the boulder suddenly split open and fell apart, making way for another of the shapes… this one easily recognizable.

It was a massive emerald jawbone, similar to a human one in all aspects except for size.

…The creepy guy had always been strangely fascinated by dead things. No wonder he got fixated on a bunch of flying bones.

As Sunny watched, the emerald bones assembled into a towering human skeleton — very similar to the powerful abomination of the same kind Sunny had fought and destroyed in the Red Colosseum, but much larger and way more frightening.

The emerald skeleton stared north for a while, and then slowly headed toward the edge of the island, each of its steps making the ground shake.

At the same time, a loud rattle of the heavenly chain rolled through the two skies. Sunny was so used to hearing them that he didn't pay it any attention at first, but then, a deep frown appeared on his face.

Something… wasn't right. The rattling of the chain sounded different, somehow.

He lingered for a few moments, then silently dove into the shadows and glided to the northern slope of the flying isle.

As soon as Sunny saw the heavenly chain stretching far into the distance, his heart grew cold.

A terrifying abomination with a body that resembled a dirty mass of pitch-black tar was crawling underneath it, its back facing the Sky Below. Each second, a dozen tendrils of liquid darkness shot forward from the mass, sticking to the links of the giant chain and pulling the creature forward.

The monstrosity was at least twenty meters long and so heavy that the iron of the heavenly tether groaned under its weight.

'...What hellish nightmare is this?'

Sunny peered beneath the surface of the black tar creature and shuddered once he saw the taint of corruption that hid within its soul. The two hideous nodes of swirling darkness that spread cancerous veins through the body of the abomination were especially ripe and horrid, revealing its Rank.

'Corrupted… a Corrupted Monster.'

Earlier, when he had been passing the islands north of his current shelter, he had felt the shadow of a powerful fiend hiding beneath one of them. Who knew that the horror nesting on the Dark Side of the flying island would turn out to be equal to the harrowing Wormvine, and then decide to follow Sunny south on top of that?

As Sunny froze for a moment, a large boulder suddenly flew from the island and hit the massive body of the Black Tar fiend, sending ripples across its liquid flesh. The force of the impact was so great that a destructive shockwave spread in all directions, causing the heavenly chain to rattle even louder.

On the surface of the island, the towering emerald skeleton lowered its arms and stared at the invading horror, dark lights igniting in the pits of its empty eye sockets.

The boulder it had just thrown disappeared within the body of the

Corrupted abomination, seemingly dealing it no damage. The creature simply continued crawling, its massive body surging forward like a black tide.

'I... I probably need to run…'

But before he could do anything, the advancing monster suddenly convulsed, and in the next second, dozens of sharp stone shards shot out of its flesh, each covered by fetid black liquid. Some rained on the emerald skeleton, and some hit the slopes of the island, causing large chunks of weathered stone to be turned into dust.

Sunny barely managed to dodge one of them, and stared with resentment at the small crater that appeared in place of his hiding place. Sure, he was an incorporeal shadow right now… but he would not make the mistake of assuming that a Corrupted abomination had no way of wounding him.

Who knew what this horror was capable of?

And just as this thought entered his mind, he noticed that there was a thin layer of black tar spread around the point of impact — and dozens of similar ones nearby. As he watched, the foul liquid started to move, coalescing into small dark blobs. Some of them began crawling up, toward the emerald skeleton…

But some froze for a moment, and then flowed toward him, as though sensing his location.

'Crap!'

Sunny hurriedly summoned back the creepy shadow and lunged away, gliding through the shadows as fast as he could. By the time he reached the bottom of the island, the Black Tar monster was already upon the skeleton.

Numerous tendrils of darkness shot forward, enveloping the towering abomination. Despite all its might, the emerald skeleton was instantly trapped and pulled inside the mass of liquid darkness. It struggled desperately, but to no avail — seconds later, its massive figure disappeared within the body of the Dark Side fiend without a trace.

'Now… just forget about me, hellspawn... I'm too small and inconsequential, anyway.'

Sunny was already on the southern slope of the island, rushing toward the other heavenly chain that led away from this damned place.

Somewhere above him, the giant mass of liquid darkness rippled, perhaps grinding the ancient emerald bones into dust…

And then, the Corrupted fiend suddenly surged forward with incredible speed, heading for the very same chain.

Or rather, for the swift shadow that hoped to use the chain to escape.

Luckily, Sunny reached it first.

He burst from the shadows, flying across the span of empty air, and landed on the surface of the heavenly tether in a roll. Without wasting a single moment, Sunny pushed himself off of the cold iron surface with all four arms, wrapped the shadows around his body, and ran.

As dull pain spread through his chest, the Mantle of the Underworld turned as light as a feather.

Just a few seconds later, the chain swayed wildly beneath his feet, announcing that the Black Tar monster had reached it, too.

'Curses!'

There were a few hundred meters of giant sunlit links in front of him, and only past that was the heavenly tether submerged into the darkness of the Sky Below and shrouded in shadows.

'I'll make it… surely, I will.'

Sunny growled, bared his fangs... and ran.

# Chapter-629: Pursuit

Sunny's upper arms were much longer than that of a human. Bending down, he fell on all fours and broke into a bestial gallop, flying forward with incredible speed. With each jump, the saving darkness grew closer and closer. The links of the heavenly chain rattled and swayed wildly beneath him as the Black Tar fiend pursued.

Sunny could have tried to find safety in the depth of the Sky Below, but his speed and maneuverability in the air would have been severely diminished. If the abomination decided to expel another rain of tar-covered projectiles, he would be shredded, torn to pieces, and consumed. Besides, there was no telling if the harrowing creature could follow him into the abyss.

His best chance was to reach the segment of the chain submerged in darkness, glide across it as a swift shadow, and escape to the next island.

Behind him, the mass of liquid darkness rolled forward with staggering speed, hundreds of black tendrils shooting out of it every moment to form a ceaseless tide. The distance between them grew smaller and smaller, and smaller still.

'Oh, gods…'

Just a split second before the tendrils of darkness descended upon him, Sunny finally reached a sufficiently low altitude and dove into the shadows, turning into one of them and rushing forward across the giant chain. The space where he stood just a moment ago was instantly enveloped by the foul flesh of the tar monstrosity, which then lunged after him, somehow starting to move even faster.

A strange, deafening sound that resembled a gurgling wail escaped from the depths of the mass of liquid darkness, causing Sunny's whole being to wreathe in pain. It washed over the world like a wave,

penetrating deep into the darkness of the Sky Below and the radiance of the Sky Above, and making both shudder.

Sunny fled across the border between two skies, and the harrowing creature from the Dark Side followed.

Soon, the length of the heavenly chain that was shrouded in shadows came to the end, and he escaped them at a terrible speed, sliding across the metal of the links and barely keeping himself from plummeting down.

A tide of black, shifting tendrils fell at him almost instantly, but hit only ancient iron. Sunny had stepped through shadows, appearing a couple of dozen meters away, and then once again, teleporting to the surface of the island that loomed above him now.

That last jump ate a lot of his essence, but he had no other choice than to make it.

Falling to the ground, Sunny grabbed at his chest, which was pulsating with dull, crippling pain, and groaned. Then, he threw himself up and continued running.

Behind him, the tendrils of black tar were already above the edge of the island.

Sunny found himself among remnants of an ancient battlefield. Carcasses of broken ships lay forlornly on the barren earth, their blackened hulls covered with scorch marks and gaping with empty darkness. Here and there, pieces of rusty weapons and armor protruded from the ground, covered with ash. The ground itself was shattered and uneven, littered with pockmarks of deep craters.

Knowing that he would never escape the giant fiend on foot, Sunny alternated between galloping and jumping through shadows for short distances, sometimes chaining several jumps in a row. By exerting every fiber of his demonic body to its limit, he managed to stay ahead of the pursuing abomination for now, even if it was just barely.

Behind him, the monstrous creature barreled through wreckages of the fallen ships, breaking them apart with a thunderous cacophony of

crashes. Its tendrils ripped the wooden hulls apart like paper, sending clouds of ash and debris flying through the air.

On the opposite side of the island, Sunny saw the remnants of a colossal pyre, thousands upon thousands of charred human bones arranged into a solemn pyramid to form it. These were, perhaps, the remains of the warriors that had fought in this battle and once crewed the broken ships.

What had brought them to this island, and what had they fought for? Who had won the terrible battle, and at what cost? Had this pyre been meant to honor fallen heroes, or dispose of dead enemies... or even prisoners, perhaps?

Without sparing a single thought to these questions, he dove down from the edge and fell through the air, reaching another chain and escaping further south. A few moments later, the Corrupted fiend flowed over the edge, as well, landing at the heavenly tether with a deafening thud.

Sunny was still ahead… the fiend failed to outrun him. For now.

The problem was that Sunny was growing tired and slowly running out of shadow essence, while the Black Tar monster was not.

South, south, south… pursued by the fiend from the Dark Side, Sunny fled south, crossing one island after another. But no matter how fast he ran, the damned monstrosity was faster.

Many of the islands he traversed were populated by Nightmare Creatures of all kinds, but unlike the towering emerald skeleton, these ones did not even try to fight the Corrupted abomination. Instead, they fled, too, scattering to the neighboring islands in something that resembled panic, or being consumed if they were not swift enough.

At some point, Sunny found himself running side by side with all kinds of Nightmare Creatures that would have usually not hesitated to attack him. They were like forest animals escaping from a raging fire… when a forest fire spread like an insatiable monster, devouring all in its way, predators and prey were made equal before its

terrifying strength.

Besides, with his monstrous body and his mind still clouded by the countless times he had shadowed the abominations of all kinds in the Red Colosseum, Sunny was less unlike the Nightmare Creatures than he had used to be.

The Black Tar monster, however, was making a clear distinction between him and all the other creatures. It only paid attention to those abominations that were directly in its way, while its only goal, for some damned reason, was singular — to catch and consume Sunny.

'Curse it all… what's so special about me?!'

Was it the fact that he followed the path of Ascension instead of Corruption? Was it his nature as a shadow? Or maybe… was it the flame of divinity that burned in his soul and flowed through his veins?

Was that flame an irresistible lure for a creature like that?

There was no answer. All Sunny could do was run, run, run... run as his chest became consumed with pain, and his soul became empty and barren, devoid of any essence at all.

...Some time later, he escaped from the shadows one last time and fell on the emerald grass of a new island, almost completely spent of essence and sapped of all stamina.

He was done… done for. His single heart was beating wildly in his aching chest, drowning as it tried to do the work meant for two. His four lungs were on fire.

This was it. This was as far as he could go.

Sunny drew in a hoarse breath, and then slowly rose to his feet. His eyes shone with grim darkness.

'So be it… good. Come and get me, beast. Let us see which one of us is stronger. I… I have killed creatures mightier than you before…'

Granted, during the battle with Wormvine, he had months of preparations and a whole cohort of Fire Keepers supporting him.

Sunny used the last of his essence to summon the Cruel Sight and turned around, ready to face the assault of the black tendrils.

However… something was off.

'...Huh?'

The rattling of the heavenly chains... it had grown quiet.

He frowned, then took a few steps toward the edge of the island and looked down.

The Black Tar monster was some distance away, its massive body hanging motionlessly from the heavenly tether. It was frozen and unmoving, with only its tendrils pulsating in a bizarre and nauseating rhythm.

The abomination… seemed to be reluctant to approach this particular island. It was as though there was an invisible boundary that it refused to cross, for some reason.

Sunny stared at the harrowing creature for a few moments, and then snarled.

…He had escaped an inescapable situation once again. He had successfully fled the pursuit of the terrifying fiend! It seemed that luck was on his side, in the end.

However…

Was it, really?

Sunny shivered.

'But what… what, exactly, can scare a Corrupted Monster away?'

# Chapter-630: Wicked Warlock of the East

Sunny stared at the terrifying fiend for a few moments, then suddenly grimaced, clutched his chest, and fell to one knee.

A bestial growl escaped through his sharp fangs.

'Argh!'

His heart was beating wildly, sending waves of pain rolling through his exhausted body. He felt weak and light-headed, beads of sweat glistening on his obsidian skin. This condition was only worsened by the usual sense of frailty that came from utterly depleting reserves of essence.

Sunny felt… infirm.

'God… damn it! Am I… am I having a heart attack?'

He groaned, remained motionless for a bit, and then slowly stood up. Still clutching his chest, he hunched awkwardly and looked around, trying to determine which island he had found himself on, and what wicked creature might have kept the Corrupted monstrosity at bay.

His pupils widened slightly.

'No way…'

The night was slowly advancing, and the island was drowned by the dimming resplendence of a beautiful crimson sunset. Despite only having been here once, Sunny recognized the place… the vastness of the island, the emerald grass that veiled its surface like a soft carpet, the rolling hills, the moss-covered ruins…

He had reached the Southern island, where the crumbling fortress lay at the estuary of the Great Chain, one of the anchors which connected the Isles to the mainland of the Dream Realm far below.

Well… the fortress had been ruined in the future. Currently, it might have been still standing.

'...Such luck.'

Sunny was glad to learn that he had arrived at the southernmost point of the Chained Isles during his mad escape from the Black Tar fiend. However, he was still uneasy about the fact that the abomination refused to approach it.

He was in no condition to fight anything, let alone a creature capable of scaring a Corrupted Monster.

But what choice was there?

Sunny glanced at the massive body of the terrifying abomination that loomed in the distance, then toward the center of the island. The choices, really, were simple: he could either jump back on the heavenly chain and try his luck in a battle against the Black Tar fiend, or remain on the island and risk meeting the unknown horror.

He hesitated for a bit… and then started limping away from the edge.

Yes, an unknown danger was almost always worse than that which was familiar… but who knew, maybe he was going to get lucky.

Maybe the unseen horror was going to turn out friendly and nice.

'Yeah… why not? Sure. Statistically speaking, a thing like that is bound to happen… one day…'

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By the time Sunny reached the center of the island, the night had already descended upon the world, and a full moon was climbing up the velvet surface of the starlit sky. The hills became shrouded in darkness, which hid and protected him, and there was a little bit of shadow essence, now, filling his three cores.

The pain in his chest had subsided somewhat, but Sunny still felt weak and feverish.

He was heading toward the southern edge of the island to take a look at the current status of the boundary fortress, and studied his surroundings carefully in search of any sign of danger. If there was indeed a terrible threat somewhere on the island, it would be better to discover it before it had the chance to discover him first.

Cresting the top of a tall hill, Sunny suddenly froze, and then crouched down. Safely veiled by the shadows, he looked at a shimmering white light that danced some distance away, in the center of a small valley that was formed by the hill he was standing on and several others.

'What… what is this?'

He hesitated for a moment, then commanded the gloomy shadow to slide off from his body and get closer to the source of light.

However… the shadow hesitated, too.

Sunny blinked.

'What the hell are you waiting for?! Get down there! You can run away if things go wrong!'

The gloomy shadow gave him a long look, then shook its head resentfully, and timidly glided forward.

Soon, Sunny saw a strange picture.

In the center of the valley, a small fire burned, its color entirely white. In front of it, a lone human figure sat. The human's head was hung low, his face obscured by the falling hair. He was naked above the waist, his pale skin covered with dry blood. However, there seemed to be no wounds on the stranger's body… in fact, there was not a single scar on it.

On a stone in front of him, a diamond sickle lay, its blade painted crimson.

The image of the bloodied man, half of his body illuminated by the warm light of the dancing flame, half washed in the cold pale moonlight, was eerie and strangely beautiful. Sunny found himself slightly hypnotized by the solemn mystery of it all, almost to the point of forgetting the danger he was in.

After a while, the man let out a deep sigh.

…And then, suddenly, spoke in a bright and melodious voice:

"Who is it there, hiding in the shadows? Don't be so timid, friend… come out. Share the warmth of this fire with me, if you wish. The night is cold and dark."

A sonorous laughter rolled across the valley.

"...Oh, don't be scared. I won't eat you."

Sunny shivered.

'Keep your voice down, fool! There's something horrible hiding on this island!'

But then, he thought for a moment and shuddered.

Unless… unless the man himself was the unknown horror.

The horror in question, meanwhile, raised his head, finally revealing his face.

It was young and beautiful, with smooth silken skin, high cheekbones, and exquisite features. The man's smile was carefree and pleasant, his eyes bright and humorous. There was a symbol of a crescent moon drawn on his forehead.

Sunny recognized him immediately, of course.

It was the exact same face he had seen a thousand times, depicted on each of the miraculous coins.

…However, Sunny had no time to pay this revelation any attention, because something else drew all of it. It was the fact that the young

man shifted slightly, turned his head, and looked directly at him.

Not even at the gloomy shadow that hid some distance away from the fire, but at the distant top of the hill where Sunny himself crouched in the shadows.

'C—crap…'

The young man beckoned him with a finger, still smiling.

"Come, come. It is rude to refuse a sincere invitation… especially one coming from such a nice person as me. Oh… where are my manners? I didn't even introduce myself! Rejoice, stranger... you are in the brilliant presence of Noctis, the great Sorcerer of the East…

# Chapter-631: The Funniest Thing in the World

Sunny froze, unsure of what the wisest course of action would be.

'What to do, what to do…'

After meeting Solvane, he had a heavy prejudice against crossing paths with powerful figures of the Kingdom of Hope. And Noctis was very powerful — of that, he had no doubt. In fact, Sunny was pretty sure that the friendly young man who was looking at him with a charming smile was none other than one of the seven immortal shackles of the imprisoned daemon, the mysterious Lord of the East.

Even without taking into account the otherworldly presence that all Transcendents seemed to possess, it was easy to tell there was vast and dreadful power within Noctis, hiding behind the deceptively carefree gleam of his lustrous eyes.

Plus, there was a Citadel in the eastern reaches of the Chained Isles literally called the Sanctuary of Noctis… who else could have been the ruler there? Who else could have possessed the beautiful flying ship, and had their image put on the miraculous coins?

So, Sunny had no desire to meet the strange immortal, even though Noctis seemed weirdly friendly and unthreatening. Actually, that only made him more terrifying.

But…

Was there even a choice? It was not like Sunny was in any shape to escape from a Saint, let alone an immortal sorcerer that even Corrupted abominations seemed to be wary of.

He hesitated for a bit, then sighed, rose, and headed toward the

crackling fire. Noticing that, Noctis hummed in satisfaction and then slightly moved his hand.

Immediately, droplets of dew flew from the grass, forming a clear stream that swirled around his body, washing the dry blood away. An exquisite silk cloak rose from the ground, wrapping itself around him. The diamond sickle whistled through the air, shaking itself clean, and hung itself on the sorcerer's belt.

Sunny continued walking, still clutching his aching chest, and observed the bizarre occurrence with a deadpan expression.

'Damn… why don't I know how to perform tricks like that? That would make life so much easier...'

Finally, under the gloating gaze of the vindictive gloomy shadow, he walked into the circle of light and couldn't help but tremble when the Saint threw a curious glance at him. It was hard to remain calm in front of a being that could obliterate you with one finger.

…The whole situation was sort of ridiculous, actually. Noctis looked like a pampered young man in bright silks, with an effeminate face and the body of someone who had never once exerted themselves physically. His hands were smooth and uncalloused, and his build was slender and soft, almost frail.

Sunny, on the other hand, was a towering demon clad in an intricate and fearsome suit of onyx armor, his gaunt figure brimming with ferocious might. He had twisting horns, four powerful arms, and a mouth full of sharp fangs, his eyes completely black and inhuman.

And yet, it was the demon who was afraid of the pampered young man, and not the other way around.

'...Ridiculous.'

Noctis studied the tenebrous demon in front of him, his smile growing wider.

"Ah, what a fortuitous encounter. A shadow! Did fate guide you to me, I wonder…"

Sunny grew very still.

'Fate? What does he mean?'

The sorcerer, meanwhile, gestured for him to sit.

"Sit down, shadow. It seems that you are unwell. Rest for a bit and warm yourself."

Sunny hesitated, then lowered himself to the ground, sitting across the dancing flames from the Transcendent. He stole a glance at Noctis's soul to make sure that he was right to call the young man so, and saw a single resplendent core shining in his chest. That was a soul of a Saint, indeed.

Noctis remained silent for a while, and then asked.

"Say, shadow… what is your name?"

Sunny lingered, then stretched a hand forward and scratched two runes into one of the stones surrounding the fire.

Sorcerer's brows flew up.

"That, uh… those runes, huh? Goodness gracious… now I am sad that I wasn't as studious as my mentors demanded, all that time ago. Those boring charlatans. Well, let's see… star? No, that should be "sun". Lost sun?

Absence of sun… Sunless?"

Sunny nodded, causing Noctis to beam with a prideful grin.

"Ha! There's indeed no one smarter than me in the Kingdom of Hope! The rumors are true… well, of course they are true, I'm the one who paid storytellers to spread them. In any case, Sunless, what a fitting name you have. Truly a name worthy of a shadow… a little on the nose, if you ask me… but very nice nevertheless. Well done!"

Sunny tilted his head, staring at the Saint in confusion.

'What the hell… is this guy just eccentric, or completely insane?'

Noctis didn't mind being stared at, and instead seemed to enjoy it a great deal. He looked at the onyx demon in return, the smile frozen on his face.

The humor in his eyes slowly disappeared, making way for a strange, dangerous gleam.

"Sunless… since fate itself has brought us together… can you answer me a simple question?"

Feeling tension spreading through his exhausted body, Sunny grew grim, and then slowly nodded.

'This is not good... not good at all! Damn it! Why is everyone in this place crazy?'

Noctis leaned forward and said, his voice deceptively calm and friendly:

"Tell me… do you, perhaps, have a knife cut from a single piece of black obsidian in your possession?"

Sunny shivered.

'How… how the hell does he know?!'

But there was nothing he could do. The question had been asked, and now, he was compelled to answer.

He struggled against the Flaw for as long as he could, then gritted his teeth and nodded again.

The immortal sorcerer stared at Sunny for a few moments, his lustrous eyes reflecting moonlight like two shining pools of pale-blue radiance.

Then, he suddenly threw his head back and exploded with joyful laughter, as though he had just heard the funniest joke in history. Noctis laughed so hard that tears appeared in his eyes, glistening in the moonlight like crystals.

Finally, he satiated his mirth and glanced at Sunny once again, the

carefree smile returning to his face.

"Ah, Sunless… fate is the funniest thing in the world, don't you think? You and I… I have a feeling that we are going to be great friends, Sunless. Believe it!"

# Chapter-632: Broken Heart

Sunny froze, his tired body tensing up. His vertical pupils narrowed, and breath escaped through his gritted fangs with a hissing sound.

'Damnation…'

Despite the strange reactions of the eccentric Saint, he wasn't fooled. Out here in the Kingdom of Hope, there was no power greater than that of the immortal wardens that guarded its imprisoned Queen.

And the only weakness the immortals had were the knives that held their fates hostage. The obsidian knife was a weapon that could destroy one of the eternal shackles, and as such, it was a priceless treasure. The very concept of value was too mundane and pedestrian to be applied to it.

And he had just revealed the fact that he possessed one to an infinitely more powerful being.

…To one of the very immortals whose lives the knife could reap.

It didn't matter if the obsidian knife was meant for Noctis himself or one of the other Shackles. If it contained his own fate, then the sorcerer would stop at nothing to gain control of it, so that no one else could. If it contained another's, he would be able to exert influence over one of the wardens, or dispose of them completely.

Noctis would undoubtedly try to take the knife…

...But, inexplicably, the sorcerer did nothing of the sort.

Instead, as Sunny stared at him in confusion, Noctis relaxed and started to hum a joyful melody. Then, he suddenly clapped his hands in excitement.

"Ah, Sunless! How fortunate it is that I've met you."

His smile dimmed a little, and his eyes, for a moment, grew dark and terrifying.

"...Before we met, you see, I was prepared to do something… rather drastic. But now, there is no need. The divination truly worked."

He remained silent for a few moments, and then seamlessly switched back to his usual carefree persona.

"This wonderful occasion demands a celebration! Yes, we simply must celebrate… while you're still alive… which won't be for long, regretfully… so, better keep it simple…"

Sunny flinched.

'...What?'

Meanwhile, something rustled in the air, and a figure of a very tall man suddenly appeared out of the darkness. Sunny tensed, surprised that the stranger managed to approach them unnoticed. Why had he not sensed the bastard?!

The figure calmly stepped into the light, revealing itself to… to not be a man at all. Instead, it was a wooden mannequin carved into a semblance of a man, wearing an elegant livery with embroidered sleeves and hem. It had simple features and held a tray with grapes, fresh fruit, and several beautifully painted amphoras of wine.

The mannequin… looked disturbingly familiar. In fact, it bore a close resemblance to a far less feral, ancient, and corrupted version of a Sailor Doll, who had been the Nightmare Creatures populating Shipwreck Island before Sunny and the Fire Keepers eradicated them.

The strange Sailor Doll placed the tray in front of them, stepped back into the darkness, and froze, becoming indistinguishable from a dead piece of wood.

Noctis smiled and reached out for one of the amphoras.

Sunny's thoughts, meanwhile, were in turmoil.

'...What the hell does he mean, I won't be alive for long?!'

He opened his mouth, then closed it in frustration and hurriedly traced several runes in the ash:

"What? Why?"

The sorcerer scowled as he tried to read them, then gave him an unapologetic smile:

"Why are we keeping it so simple? Yes… of course, you would be confused. See, usually, I would have thrown a great feast to celebrate the occasion. I am the most gracious person in the Kingdom of Hope, after all! But, sadly, we will have to be satisfied with this shameful…"

Sunny furiously shook his head, and then drew several more runes:

"Sunless. Death. Why?"

Noctis stared at him with surprise:

"Well… aren't you dying? That broken heart of yours is giving out. I thought that this was why you came here, to spend your last few days near his resting place."

Sunny blinked a few times, trying to digest what he had just heard.

Was his one remaining heart really failing? It… it did feel like it was on the verge of tearing apart, during his escape from the Black Tar monster. It continued to ache dully still…

And whose resting place was Noctis talking about? No, that was not important right now.

He erased the previous runes and traced two more:

"Heart. Broken?"

Noctis frowned.

"Wait… do you... do you, perhaps, not want to die? I, uh… I didn't say anything before in order to respect your wishes, but if dying

peacefully was not your intention, then why are you wasting time drinking wine with me? Sunless... are you crazy?"

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, unamused, his eyes full of resentment. Then, he ground his fangs and wrote:

"No. Don't know. Maybe. Heart. Heal?"

The sorcerer scratched his head.

"...You are a very strange shadow, Sunless. Well… mending a broken heart is not easy. And yours is not only broken, you also seem to have misplaced one. Until you replace the lost heart, there is no point in healing the one that remains. It will just break apart again. But where would a shadow creature like you find a suitable heart in this godforsaken land?"

He sighed.

"The servants of Shadow are all gone, and so are the servants of Heart. Without them, only the greatest of healers would be able to build a heart worthy of a shadow demon from scratch."

Noctis looked down dejectedly... but then, a mischievous smile appeared on his face.

"...Luckily, I am the most gifted and renowned healer in the Kingdom of Hope! For me, creating a new heart for you won't be much of a problem. But, Sunless… despite the fact that you and I are dear friends, a favor like that is not something to be given lightly. I wouldn't want to put a strain on our friendship, you know? So… you will have to do something for me, too.

That would only be polite, don't you think?"

Sunny had a feeling that he was being swindled — after all, he was an accomplished swindler himself. However, that didn't really matter. The part of Noctis's words about the inevitable failure of his one remaining heart, at least, rang true.

Perhaps if Sunny managed to not put any excessive strain on it in the future, things would be fine. But what were the chances of him

having a peaceful life in a Nightmare?

…Zero. He desperately needed a functioning heart, and better yet, two of them. Only then would he be back to his full strength and ready to face the challenges that lay ahead.

Sunny sighed and drew several runes, already suspecting what he would hear.

'He wants the damned knife, doesn't he? That bastard...'

"Sunless. Do. What?"

Noctis looked at him for a few moments, then smiled.

What he said next, however, was not what Sunny expected to hear.

The sorcerer suddenly turned around and gestured south.

"Oh, it's nothing much, really. You see, there's an abandoned fortress on the edge of this island. All I want is for you to climb inside… and remain there until dawn. Actually, it will be best if you can fall asleep. So… a little nap in exchange for a new heart. Doesn't sound too bad, does it?

I mean, it's just a few hours of sleep… really, what's the worst that could happen?"

...The gloomy shadow grabbed its head in utter despair.

# Chapter-633: Dead Fortress

Sunny remained silent for a long time, looking at Noctis with a grim expression. Finally, he shifted and drew several runes, the onyx claw of his armored gauntlet moving through the ash with swift precision:

"Fortress. Danger. Inside?"

The sorcerer laughed.

"Danger… of course there is danger. But don't worry. It is nothing that you won't be able to handle. Uh… I think. Believe, even! Regardless, there's no one in the entire Kingdom of Hope better suited for this task thank you, Sunless. So… hurry up. Time's a wasting…"

Sunny scowled, unamused by the fact that Noctis avoided the question. Unwilling to let go, he growled and pointed to the runes again.

The sorcerer sighed wistfully.

"It's not that I don't want to tell you, Sunless. It's just that there's no point. You won't remember, anyway… but this will benefit us both, trust me. This fortress once belonged to a friend of mine. He was one of Hope's shackles, just like me, and a shadow, just like you. Do you see now why I think that fate itself has brought us together?"

Sunny held his breath.

'So, I was right. Noctis is indeed one of the immortals.'

And, more than that, one of the original seven had been a follower of Shadow God. Only five wardens were still alive, and none of them held dominion over the south… so, it was safe to assume that this Shadow Lord was dead. Suddenly, the sorcerer's comment about this

island being someone's resting place made more sense.

If so… maybe there were some relics that the Transcendent of Shadows left behind in the fortress?

That changed things... a little...

Sunny hesitate for a while, and then gestured to his chest.

Noctis smiled.

"What? Surely, you are not doubting my skill! Rest assured, Sunless, I'll create a wonderful new heart for you. I'll even replace the fingers you seem to be missing, as a bonus. Unless not having fingers is your preference, of course..."

Sunny stared at him for a few minutes, then sighed and stood up. Picking up a bunch of grapes, he glanced at the eccentric sorcerer one more time, and then headed south, toward the edge of the island where the abandoned fortress stood.

'You won't remember it, anyway… I wonder what the hell did he mean?'

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As he walked, Sunny noticed several clusters of beautiful white flowers growing here and there among the emerald grass. The closer to the fortress he came, the more of these flowers there were. Despite the fact that it was the middle of the night, their buds were open, filling the air with a faint, but pleasant smell.

A deep scowl appeared on his face.

'These flowers…'

They looked vaguely familiar. He slowly ate the sweet, succulent grapes and searched his memory for a hint of where he might have seen them. After a while, his expression turned even darker.

There was an island in the eastern reaches of the Chained Isles, not too far from the Sanctuary of Noctis, covered by a vast and beautiful field of such white flowers. Everyone, even the most competent cohorts of Awakened and those from the White Feather clan, avoided this island like a plague.

The ground there was littered with bones of all kinds, hidden beneath the delicate white petals. As soon as a person stepped on the surface of the island, they would feel an irresistible desire to stop, rest, and fall asleep.

…And if they succumbed to that desire, none ever woke up.

Sunny silently cursed.

'Is that bastard trying to kill me?'

But, for some reason, he had trouble believing that Noctis simply wanted him dead. A Saint had far easier ways to kill an Awakened, let alone someone as tired and weakened as him. There was no need to go to such lengths.

So, what the sorcerer had said must have been true, or at least close to it. He believed that Sunny was uniquely suited for the task and had a good chance of accomplishing it alive.

But why? What was so special about Sunny? What could he do that even a Transcendent could not?

Was it because he was connected to Shadow God, as the previous owner of the fortress had been?

Full of dark thoughts, he crested another hill and saw the familiar silhouette of the boundary stronghold not too far away.

It was in much better condition than it had been in the future. In fact, it almost looked whole… if not for the moss covering its walls, the lack of lights, and the deathly silence that enveloped it, Sunny would have thought that the castle was still inhabited by humans.

The tall walls built of grey stone rose high into the night sky, and the massive gates were closed shut. The ancient fortress was bathed in the pale moonlight, looking somber and foreboding, like a cursed tomb.

Sunny grimaced.

'...Not ominous at all.'

Still clutching his chest, he made his way down the hill and approached the menacing stronghold. Its walls had not crumbled yet, so the path he had taken to get inside the last time did not exist yet.

Full of grim unease, Sunny thrust his claws into the ancient stone and started climbing. These walls were nothing compared to the great wall of the Dark City… getting to the top was not going to be hard, even for a human.

And currently, he wasn't even human. He was a demon, be it a dying one.

Soon, he finally reached the top of the wall and crouched on its lip, looking down into the empty courtyard. Here, the signs of abandonment were more pronounced — there were dust and dirt everywhere, with weeds growing through the ancient cobblestones. The fortress was desolate and hollow, devoid of anyone to inhabit and take care of it.

He hesitated with a decision for a bit, and then reluctantly send two of his shadows away to explore the stronghold. If there was indeed a powerful creature nesting inside, they would surely find it…

Minutes passed in tense anticipation. The shadows glided through the empty corridors and halls of the abandoned stronghold, through its towers and dungeons. However, no matter where they looked, they did not find any sign of life.

What they did find, however, were corpses.

Here and there, human skeletons lay, still dressed in archaic garments and armor. There was no sign of struggle around them, no tears on their clothes, and no apparent wounds on their bodies. It just

seemed as though the former garrison of the stronghold had lowered themselves to the ground and died for no reason whatsoever.

All of it was just too eerie.

'Curse it all… curse the damned immortals, and curse this damned place…'

Sunny almost turned around and ran, but then, his chest pulsed with pain, reminding him of the reason for why he had come here.

With a deep sigh, he jumped down from the lip of the wall and walked toward the main structure of the fortress.

'Time to find me a soft bed…'

Sunny entered the donjon, summoned the shadows back, and walked through the silent halls on his way to the higher levels of the massive tower. Once there, he walked around for a bit, searching for a suitable room, and soon found one that seemed to be both comfortable and well-protected.

Unceremoniously throwing a corpse in a rotten nightgown off the bed, he lay down in its place and tiredly closed his eyes.

Sure, this place was beyond creepy… but he was, in fact, tired to the bone and in desperate need of rest. Some sleep would do him good...

'What's the big deal, anyway… I've slept in far worse places…'

Before falling into the embrace of oblivion, he summoned Saint from the shadows and gave her a mental command to watch over him. After hesitating for a bit, Sunny did the same with the Soul Serpent.

Only once the two Shadows assumed guard did he allow himself to relax.

In the silence of the abandoned fortress, Sunny could easily hear the strained beating of his heart. However, he was too exhausted to pay it any attention.

Just a few minutes later, he was already sound asleep.

…And just a moment before falling into deep slumber, with his mind already half-gone, he thought that he heard an unexpected sound somewhere close, but also far away.

It was like the ringing of hooves on the cold stone floors…

# Chapter-634: Pillar of Flame

Sunny woke up just before dawn. He lay still for a while, reluctant to leave the warm embrace of the blankets. Then, with a sigh, he sat up and shivered in the morning cold. It was time to face a new day, and there was a lot to do. He had no excuses to laze about…

A dull pain suddenly radiated through his chest. He looked down with a confused expression, studying the old scars covering his tan, bronze skin.

'...I guess it's going to rain?'

Then, an ivory arm suddenly appeared from beneath the blankets, caressing his firm muscles.

"Is it morning already?"

Sunny smiled, grasped the hand of his wife, and nodded.

"Yes, my sunshine."

She sighed.

"Alright… go, get ready. I'll wake up the little devil."

He remained motionless, leisurely enjoying the sight of the beauty he had somehow managed to coax into marrying a ruffian like him dressing herself, careful not to disturb the round belly where their second child slept peacefully, with not a care in the world. His smile grew a little wider.

"I said go! Today is not the day for your mischief, hoodlum… have you forgotten?"

Sunny made a dejected face, then rose and dressed, as well.

When he left their quarters, the servants were already hard at work, preparing for the day. When they saw him, each bowed respectfully and greeted him with warm voices. Being subjected to all this adoration and decorum, Sunny had to put on a face worthy of a lord, as well.

'How bothersome...'

The servants were going to prepare everything for the upcoming journey, but one thing he had to do himself. That was something that Sunny would not allow anyone else to perform, not for the lack of trust, but simply because it was his duty.

Entering the stables, he greeted his steed and went about feeding and watering the noble beast before putting the saddle on his wide back. Sunny might have become a lord of some renown and left his turbulent past behind, but the bond between a warrior and his horse was sacred.

Just because the two of them didn't have to risk their lives on a battlefield anymore didn't mean that he would forget it.

When all was done, he led the horse to the courtyard and attached the weathered wooden scabbard to the saddle, the cold steel of a beautiful sword hidden safely within.

Then, he stared at the scabbard for some time, massaging his aching chest with a distant expression. A subtle, dark expression appeared on his face.

After a while, the sound of quick steps headed his way.

"Dad!"

Sunny turned around and grinned as he caught his son in an iron embrace.

"Trying to sneak up on your poor old father, huh? Not so fast… I was sneaking up on monsters long before you were born, brat!"

The boy giggled, and then took a step back.

He was turning seven today, and on that occasion, his mother had dressed him in the best clothes they had. The little devil almost looked like a proper child, and not a Corrupted abomination sent to the mortal realm to torture his helpless parents.

"Why did you have to sneak up? Too weak to kill them outright, huh?"

Sunny sighed in exasperation and stared at the heavens.

'Lady, help me…'

Why did their son have to inherit his poisonous tongue, as well?

The boy, meanwhile, turned around and looked into the distance, where the beautiful silhouette of the Ivory Tower could already be seen in the morning haze. His eyes widened.

"Dad… is it true? Am I going to see her today? The Lady?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then nodded.

"Of course. You are turning seven, are you not? Today is a divine day. So, you will meet our goddess... to introduce yourself, and pledge yourself to her service."

His son frowned.

"But she isn't really a… a goddess, is she? Won't other gods be angry with me?"

Sunny laughed.

"Gods! Gods are too great and mighty to know what jealousy means, kid. Why would they mind? Lady Hope gives us shelter and safety, protects us from the Corruption, from war, famine, plague... and even ourselves. If that is not something worthy of worship, then I don't know what is."

With that, he jumped into the saddle, and then lifted the boy to sit in front of him.

"Let's go!"

They left the manor and followed the road of white stones through a peaceful forest and up the hill. The horse walked forward at a steady pace, easily bearing the weight of two riders. Sunshine fell through the canopy of leaves in wide beams, making their surroundings look like a fairy tale.

Sunny was enjoying the beauty of the forest and its tranquility. A long time ago… before coming to the Kingdom of Hope… he had known neither. His life had been nothing but bloodshed and pain, battle after battle, war after war… only after coming to this realm and deciding to remain here did he learn the truth of how joyous life could be.

Especially when shared with those you love.

…His son, however, didn't know anything about strife and darkness. This peace was all he had ever known. For that reason, he was extremely bored.

The boy fidgeted for a few minutes, then stared at the hilt of Sunny's sword.

"One day, I'm going to have a sword of my own! It will be way bigger and sharper than yours, old man. Mark my words!"

Sunny laughed.

"What do you need a sword for?"

His son glanced at him with confusion.

"What do you mean, what for? To become an Awakened! A warrior, like you!"

Sunny looked away and didn't respond for a while. His eyes grew distant.

…His heart ached. Why did it ache so much today?

"I was a warrior once, true. But I never chose to be a warrior. I just

became one to survive. In the Kingdom of Hope, you don't need to fight, suffer, and kill others to live a long and happy life. Why would you still want to be a warrior?

The boy fell silent, a comically thoughtful frown appearing on his face. He turned away and didn't say anything else for a while.

Sunny doubted that his son really understood what he meant. And he hoped that the boy never would.

Closing his eyes, he said a silent prayer:

'Hail to you, Desire, Demon of Hope. Please, hear my yearning. Protect my son from all the horrors of the world and save him, as you have saved me…'

Silently, the three of them — the man, the boy, and the horse — left the forest and climbed the tall hill. From its top, a breathtaking sight opened before them.

In front of them, a vast plain was bathed in sunlight, emerald grass shining with the morning dew. Here and there, farmsteads and fields stood, golden wheat swaying in the wind. Sparkling ribbons of rivers cut the plain, and in the distance, a beautiful city built of white stone rose from the ground, with a magnificent pagoda towering above it.

Sunny couldn't help but smile.

No matter how many times he saw it, he couldn't help but feel a little bit sentimental.

"...Hey, do you want to wave to your mother? I'm sure she's looking in this direction right now!"

His son glanced at him with a pitying expression.

"Are you crazy? She won't see us. We're too far away!"

Sunny laughed.

"Says who?"

He turned around and looked back, at a similar landscape that lay behind them. Gazing past the forest, he saw the small town and a humble stone manor standing near it. From this distance, the building looked like a toy…

He raised his hand and waved.

"Hey, dad…"

Sunny scoffed.

"What? Are you going to mock me some more?"

The boy shook his head.

"No. It's just... what is wrong with the sky? It looks funny."

'...Huh?'

Sunny raised his head, then frowned in confusion.

The sky, indeed, looked funny.

The sun was still climbing up, but there seemed to be a second one right above them, swelling with incandescent light. The sky itself was growing brighter and brighter, as if permeated with intense heat. The clouds were all gone…

A gust of hot wind suddenly blew past them.

His eyes suddenly narrowed.

"W—wait!"

In the next second, a colossal pillar of incandescent flame suddenly fell from the sky, piercing the plain and shattering the land like glass. A blinding flash drowned the world in white, and through it, a terrible sound rolled across the forest. Deafened, Sunny felt his son screaming, but could not hear his voice.

At the point where the pillar of flame fell, the ground itself was split open and thrown into the air, colossal pieces of melted earth raining

down fire, ash, and death.

The hill on which they stood shook, and then shifted, throwing Sunny off the horse.

'No, no, no…'

Still dazed, he tried to find his son, but failed.

Instead, his gaze fell on the small town and the stone manor that stood in the distance.

As Sunny watched in horror, the ground opened up, with fountains of fire shooting into the sky. The houses were instantly devoured by the flames and incinerated, turning into clouds of ash.

'No, no, no!'

In the next moment, the whole hill crumbled.

The last thing Sunny saw before being smothered by the avalanche of scorching earth was the fragile figure of his son being swallowed by flames.

'No!'

And then, he died.

***

Pain, pain, pain…

Why did his heart hurt so much?

Sunny opened his eyes in the darkness and sat down, throwing the furs aside. He stared at his feeble chest, then touched it with a shaking hand, surprised. Since when did his chest start to ache during the night?

'Ah, being old is not fun…'

Chasing the remnants of a terrible nightmare away, he struggled to sit up and massaged his joints for a while, waiting until some

flexibility returned to them. Then, he slowly stood up and closed his eyes, listening to the sounds of the Sacred Grove that enveloped him.

Well, at least he woke up alive. At his age, that was already an accomplishment!

If only his heart didn't ache so much…

But that was just what being old meant. Every dawn brought a new ache... actually, Sunny would have been more scared if he woke up and suddenly felt perfectly fine.

In any case…

It was time to face a new day.

# Chapter-635: The Will of Gods

Using a wooden cane, Sunny walked out of his hut and breathed in the clear, sweet air of the Sacred Grove.

The ancient trees rustled gently, as if greeting him. The forest was slowly waking up, emerald leaves longing to be bathed in the warmth of the sun once more. A chilly fog was flowing between the mighty trunks, suffused with the vibrant lilac light of the early dawn. The nightingales sang cheerfully, jumping from branch to branch… the sight of it was familiar, beautiful, and calming.

Truly, the grove of Heart God was the jewel of the Kingdom of Hope. How lucky he was to have been born and spend most of his life here!

These trees had stood upon the ancient land before it had been shattered, weathered the terrible cataclysm of Desire's imprisonment, and were going to remain standing here long after he was dead and forgotten, his bones buried at their roots. Now that Sunny was old and didn't have a lot of time left to live, that thought was very comforting.

A human's life might be fleeting, but the beautiful grove was eternal.

He patted one of the ancient oaks as an old friend, sighed, and limped toward the water spring to fill his jug.

Since Sunny's hut stood at the outskirts of the grove, he could see the edge of the island through the spaces between the tree trunks. As always, it rose and fell slowly, the heavenly chains rattling from time to time. Everything was just as usual… which was the very best thing in the world.

Sunny had lived a long life. Some of it was peaceful, and some of it was turbulent… but luckily, the turbulent times had not visited this quiet forest for a long, long time. And that was the only thing that he

had always wanted — to live a quiet and tranquil life, far away from all the strife and misfortune of the everchanging world.

Change… change always brought ruin on its wings. Sunny wanted no part of it.

However, today, his desires were not meant to come true. Something unexpected did happen, disturbing the familiar routine of his day…

At the very edge of the island, a mighty black steed suddenly appeared, as if jumping from below, where a giant chain connected to the soil of the Sacred Grove. He walked forward at a steady pace, approaching the line of ancient trees.

The steed had no saddle, but there was a rider on his back. A pretty young woman in a simple red tunic sat there, her ivory legs svelte and bare. She had a graceful figure, a face so lovely that it simply demanded to be gazed upon, and chestnut hair that fell down like a silken waterfall.

Sunny stared at the young woman, mesmerized by her beauty. Then, he scoffed, and shook his head.

"What are you even doing, old fool… your days of ogling pretty girls are long over! This beauty is young enough to be your granddaughter. Have some shame, you vile lecher!"

He chuckled wryly, and then changed his course to greet the unexpected guest.

A dozen meters or so away from the line of trees, the young beauty stopped her horse, jumped down with breathtaking grace, and knelt in the soft grass, looking down as other pilgrims would usually do.

Sunny made his way toward the girl, panting a little from the strain, and tried to put on a smile worthy of an enlightened elder. For some reason, the closer he got to the beauty, the worse his heart ached.

'Ah, what's wrong with this frail body of mine today?'

"Greetings, young lady! Uh... welcome. What brings you to the Heart Grove? Tell this old man your worries… maybe I'll be able to help."

The beauty did not raise her head, still looking down, as if to show her respect and reverence. Her voice, when she spoke, was melodious and calm… however, Sunny had been meeting pilgrims like her for many decades. All of them came here overwhelmed by sorrows and regret… that was why they sought out a passage to the Sacred Grove. This was a place of solace.

He could sense a deep ocean of darkness hiding behind the facade of calmness the young woman had put on, too.

She said:

"...I seek audience with the Lady of the Grove."

Sunny lingered for a bit, then sighed.

'So young, and yet so troubled… how sad…'

Then, he leaned on his cane and smiled.

"Well… she ought to be up and about, by now. How about that? I'll wait with you until the Lady arrives."

The young beauty didn't answer, and simply continued to stare down, still like a statue. Her breathing was deep and steady. Even her scary black horse seemed patient and indifferent.

Suddenly, Sunny felt a strange unease. He took a closer look at the girl, and frowned.

'Do I have dementia now? What, in the name of Hope, is that?'

His eyes seemed to be playing tricks on him. Sunny could swear that he saw a radiant sphere of light burning inside the young beauty's chest… not that he was looking in that direction…

Without any reason, his hand suddenly stretched sideways, his palm opening, as if waiting to grasp something out of the air.

Sunny stared at it in confusion.

'...Weird. What are you doing, stupid hand?'

He awkwardly hid the willful hand behind his back and cleared his throat. Maybe he didn't quite recover from that terrible nightmare yet…

As he did so, the young woman suddenly spoke, her head still bowed.

"Tell me… have you ever seen the Ivory Tower?"

'What an unexpected question...'

Sunny grinned.

"Oh… sure. When I was a senseless youth, not much older than you. He-he. It might not look like it, but this elder was quite a wastrel once! I ran away from home and went on an adventure. That was when I saw the Ivory City, and many other things.

But eventually, I came back to this grove… there is nowhere better than home, I believe."

He thought for a few moments, and then said:

"Why do you ask?"

The young woman remained silent for a while.

"...I heard that there's an evil demon locked inside the Tower. That the gods put her there as a punishment for her malevolence, corruption, and pride. Do you think it's true?"

Sunny chuckled.

"Ah, that. Sometimes I forget how much knowledge has been lost by us, the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Hope. Yes, young lady, there is indeed a daemon imprisoned within the Ivory Tower… however, she was never evil, malevolent, or corrupt. In fact, Hope was very kind and generous to us, humans."

The beauty shifted slightly.

"Oh? Why did the gods punish her, then?"

Sunny sighed dejectedly.

"That is the question, isn't it? Why destroy this land and put its kind Lady in shackles? Who knows... if mortals like us could know the will of gods, then, maybe, we'd be gods instead…"

There it was again! The radiant flame in the young woman's chest… he wasn't imagining things, it was really there!

Sunny was about to try and get a better look, uncaring of how improper such an attempt would seem, but at that moment, a dearly familiar voice came from behind him.

…However, he had never heard that voice sound so somber and grave.

The Lady of the Grove said:

"...Why are you here, Solvane?"

# Chapter-636: Desecration

"Why have you come here, Solvane?"

Sunny turned around, looking at the delicate woman who stood behind him, her dress woven out of simple green fabric, a girdle of tree bark wrapped around her thin waist. Despite looking only slightly older than their guest, with soft skin and sparkling hazel eyes, she had a calm and confident presence about her that brought peace and a feeling of safety to all who surrounded her.

The woman looked beautiful, wise… and young. So, so young. She also resembled Sunny very much.

As always, seeing her brought both warm joy and deep sadness to his heart.

Sunny smiled, hiding his sorrow, then said in a tone most gentle and loving:

"...Hey, mom. We have a guest."

The Lady of the Grove — his mother — looked at him for a short moment, and then answered in a voice that rang with tension and urgency:

"Get away from her, child. Now!"

Sunny frowned, confused, then did as he was told, arduously pushing his old body forward with the help of the cane. His heart was sending pulses of pain radiating through his chest… ah, even walking was hard today…

Behind him, a dark smile appeared on the face of the young beauty whom his mother called Solvane. She slowly rose from the grass and faced the Lady of the Grove, her radiant eyes burning with grim light.

"You must know why I came here. There is no need to pretend, Aidre."

Sunny finally reached his mother and stood beside her, turning around to look at the strange pilgrim.

'Something… something isn't right. How does she know my mother's name?'

Was she, perhaps, a powerful Awakened? Well, whoever she was, the eternal guardian of the Sacred Grove was not going to let things get too out of hand. She was not only his mother, but also Transcendent Aidre, the blessed of Heart God, after all. So, there was no reason to worry.

Nothing terrible ever happened in the Sacred Grove.

His thoughts were interrupted by the fact that, suddenly, another brilliant sphere of light appeared in view… this one inside the body of his own mother. Sunny stared at her back for a few moments, then glanced at Solvane. He even looked at the horse.

'Huh…'

Meanwhile, the smile disappeared from Solvane's beautiful face. Her voice turned cold and sharp as she said:

"I have heard rumors that across all of the Kingdom of Hope, a cult of her followers was slowly spreading like a virulent plague. Imagine my surprise… my indignation, my rage... when I discovered that you were the source of this disease. You!"

Sunny's face darkened.

'Ah… so that's what this is all about…'

He had warned his mother that this might happen. Saying anything good about a daemon was tantamount to offending the gods, these days. Maybe he should have followed his own advice and kept his mouth shut earlier…

'Damnation.'

Solvane, meanwhile, clenched her fists.

"I came here wishing to be proven wrong, but instead, saw that the accusations were true. Your own son is infected by this heresy. How… how could you betray us so? You have created a cult of daemon worshippers. You have nurtured the very thing that we were created to prevent!"

The Lady of the Grove scowled.

"So what if I did? Do you think, perhaps, that I have forgotten the solemn oath we had given? No… no, you are the ones who are blind to the will of the Lord of Light. You are the ones who have failed in your duty."

Solvane stared at the delicate woman in the green dress for a while, her expression grim. Then, she slowly shook her head:

"You are… so broken. How did you allow your soul to get so twisted? You, out of all of us, should have been the last to become lost. Your god should have protected you… he is the God of Souls, is he not?!"

Sunny heard his mother chuckle, her voice devoid of amusement.

"Be done with it, Solvane. Did you not say that there was no need for us to pretend? Just say what you have come to say, and leave this place. War isn't welcomed here."

The young beauty in a red tunic remained silent for a long time, then slowly raised her hand. Sunny frowned, noticing that there was now a strange knife forged out of a single strip of dull metal in it. Where did it come from?

His mother suddenly trembled.

…He had never seen her afraid before.

"You… you wouldn't dare…"

Solvane gritted her teeth.

"You forced my hand, Aidre. None of us wanted this. But in the end,

they all agreed."

The Lady of the Grove fell silent, then shook her head.

"...You lie. Noctis would never abandon me."

She took a step forward, and smiled.

"No one agreed. You are here of your own will, with none of the other Chain Lords giving their permission. Do you really think that they would allow something like that to happen? No matter which one of us falls, the one who remains will no longer be fateless. The balance of power between us seven will be irrevocably broken, obliterated. Are you mad?

Can you even imagine what kind of disaster will follow?"

But then, her voice trailed off, and she stumbled. Her beautiful hazel eyes widened.

Sunny shivered, feeling that, just then, something had gone terribly, terribly wrong.

His mother stared at Solvane, her face growing deathly pale.

And then, she whispered:

"Unless… unless you do, better than any of us. Oh... oh, Solvane! How ruthless you are!"

Sunny felt his heartache growing stronger. There was a cold sensation grasping his chest, making him clutch at it with a pained grimace.

'Argh.... what are they even talking about? I don't understand... what is going on?'

Aidre of the Sacred Grove looked down for a long time, then spoke.

Her voice was quiet and full of sorrow:

"I see… I see now. I understand. I should have known… that out of all of us, you are the bravest. This sacrifice, Solvane... even in the

Realm of Shadows, I won't forget it."

With that, she turned to Sunny, who was really confused by what was happening, and smiled sadly.

"And you… I'm sorry, child. Please forgive me, if you can."

With that, his mother faced the beauty in the red tunic and raised her delicate hand, a knife carved out of a single piece of wood suddenly appearing in it, as though out of nowhere.

Her voice grew firm and determined:

"However, Solvane… you should have never challenged me on this hallowed ground. I won't give up without a fight, and neither will my Grove."

The young woman facing her smiled, her radiant eyes shining with a furious light.

"...Prove it!"

***

"Mom… mom…"

Sunny crawled through the ash, suffocating on bitter smoke. Tears streamed down his wrinkled cheeks, evaporating because of the terrible heat. His heart ached… oh, it ached so horribly!

All of him was in pain. And all around him, the Sacred Grove burned, enveloped by incinerating, raging fire. He could hear the screams of its inhabitants echoing in the dim darkness, humans and beasts alike, burning alive as their whole world was being slowly turned into ash.

'How can this be… how, how?!'

Pushing himself forward with the weak hands of a useless old man, he crawled toward the delicate figure lying on the ground a few meters… so, so far… away.

He refused to die before he reached it.

The ground was scorching his palms, which were now covered in terrible blisters, but he persisted, unwilling to give up.

'Mom...'

And then, finally, he reached her.

The Lady of the Grove lay dead amidst the fire, shards of a strange iron dagger sizzling in the bloodsoaked mud around her. Swallowing tears, Sunny awkwardly hugged her body and let out a stifled howl.

Why… why did it feel so familiar? As though he had felt this pain once, a long time ago, already… in another world...

"Why are you dead? Weren't you supposed to be immortal? How can this be? No, no… this is just a bad dream, a nightmare. I need to wake up! Wake up, you old fool!

Wake… wake up!"

But no matter what he did, he couldn't. Even if it was just a nightmare, he was trapped in it, unable to escape.

'Trapped… in a nightmare?'

As this strange thought rang in his mind, a trunk of an ancient tree suddenly fell nearby, a whirlwind of fiery sparks and burning debris raising into the air. Sunny stared at it, feeling his vision darken and his thoughts disappear one after another.

He was coughing, unable to stop… he couldn't breathe… he was suffocating…

'How did this happen?'

The old man stared at the burning forest, his eyes aflame with grief and mad disbelief.

How could the Sacred Grove be destroyed?

Wasn't it supposed to stand tall, beautiful and tranquil, long after he was dead?

Wasn't it supposed to outlive him?

A sense of utter, lightless sorrow and despair drowned his mind, just like smoke was drowning his lungs and pain was drowning his body.

'This is a nightmare… just a nightmare… it can't be real… no, no, no!'

That bitter thought was the last one that appeared in Sunny's mind before he fell into the searing darkness.

And in that darkness, alone and hurting, he died.

***

Pain, pain, pain…

Terrible, torturous pain.

His heart was in pain, but so was the rest of him.

Sunny couldn't open his eyes, because they were glued together with dried blood. But if he did, all he would see would be the dark walls of a dungeon cell, where he was strapped to a rusty torture device, red-hot metal spikes thrust into his body.

Lost and forgotten, far away from the light of the blessed sun…

A familiar voice invaded his ears, making him shudder.

"...Ah, you're awake. Good. You've been out of it for so long this time, my friend. Shall we continue?"

'More torture…'

Sunny sighed, knowing what awaited him all too well.

He could barely remember who he was before ending up in this cold dungeon, or why he was being tormented by the owner of the cursed voice. All he knew was pain, darkness, and despair.

However, this time, all of it didn't seem so terrible. What could have been worse than the harrowing nightmare he had just seen?

Solvane, Aidre, Noctis… the names sounded familiar. Had he known these people once, perhaps? Before this hell... if anything even existed outside of it, of course.

In any case, that didn't matter.

All that mattered was pain, torment, and hopelessness.

He gritted his teeth.

It was time to face a new day…

# Chapter-637: Iron Cage

The torture continued without end.

Day after day, night after night.

Sunny screamed when he had the voice, and remained silent when he lost it. A long time ago… decades ago… he still had pride, and endured the torment without giving the torturer the satisfaction of hearing him howl, cry, and beg.

But there was no point. Pride had no place here… only pain.

Anyone should have died from the inhuman agony he was subjected to and the terrible wounds dealt to his body. But Sunny didn't die… was unable to die… and so, there was no end to his anguish.

Every morning, his wounds were gone, as if he was born anew. Every morning, the torturer returned, and the cycle continued.

The torturer, himself, never asked Sunny any questions. It was as though he was tormenting his prisoner just for the sake of torment. However… the master of the dungeon never seemed to enjoy his cruelty. He never reveled in the agony of his victim, and instead seemed almost sad while performing his duties.

Why was this happening?

How long had it been happening?

When would this neverending nightmare end?

'Neverending… nightmare…'

Sunny didn't know… he barely knew himself anymore. All he knew was fear, darkness, and pain.

'Lord, save me…'

On one of these days, he opened his eyes to see the torturer entering the cell. His personal executioner was tall and noble in bearing, with skin as white as ivory, lustrous golden hair, and amber eyes that were full of calmness, conviction, and melancholy.

Just like always, the torturer started preparing his tools, and just like always, Sunny strained his mangled body, pointlessly trying to break free of his shackles.

…But this time, something unexpected happened. Sunny froze and stared at the radiant man in front of him, his eyes widening.

'Can this be?'

Just like in the harrowing nightmare he had seen a few days ago, there was a beautiful sphere of light burning within the torturer's chest. Its splendor washed over Sunny, making the terrible pain recede for a moment.

A weak, pale smile found its way onto his face.

Sunny bathed in the light, and whispered:

"Sun…"

Oh, how he had longed to see the sun again...

The torturer froze, then slowly turned to him. His amber eyes shone with sudden emotion.

"...You are speaking again?"

He took a tentative step forward and studied Sunny's face, then gently caressed it.

"Brother, my brother… how good it is to hear your voice once more."

Sunny shivered.

"...Brother? Are we… brothers?"

He was weak, and confused. Thoughts danced chaotically in his broken mind, fragile like snowflakes in the summer's heat. He found it hard to concentrate on anything, even if he wanted to. But… he didn't want to. Not for a long time.

The torturer smiled sadly.

"Have you forgotten even me?"

Sunny frowned, trying to remember. Brother… did he have a brother? Yes, he used to, once. His brother was noble, valiant, and wise. His brother was blessed by the Lord of Light. He was entrusted with a sacred duty…

And so was Sunny himself.

…Or maybe he was just remembering shattered fragments of old nightmares. Who could tell?

He weakly shook his head.

"If we are brothers… then... why? Why are… you torturing me?"

The torturer remained silent for a while, then laughed sadly.

"Ah, that old question. You haven't asked it in decades."

He leaned forward and looked at Sunny with sorrow.

"Don't you remember? You were the one who asked me to do this, after all."

Sunny's pupils widened.

'No… no…'

"I… asked you?"

The torturer nodded.

"As penitence, for the terrible sin you committed. For betraying the trust of the Lord of Light. Was it… a century ago? Yes, almost."

He turned away and picked up a long blade, thrusting it into the flames that burned furiously in a golden brazier.

"It has been almost a century since you abandoned me. Ah… enduring our duty alone was not easy, my brother. It wasn't easy at all. But I never broke my word to you."

Sunny stared as the blade was slowly starting to glow inside the flames. Knowing that it would be soon thrust into his flesh instead, he shuddered.

"If I… asked you… then stop. I don't… don't want it anymore."

The torturer looked down, then smiled darkly.

"Stop? But we can't stop. Not until you answered the question."

Sunny's eyes were glued to the blade. He whispered:

"Question? What question?"

His brother was silent for a bit, and then asked:

"Where is that which was entrusted to us by the Lord? What have you done with the knives?"

'Knives? What knives?'

Sunny couldn't recall any knife, and could only think about the one that was already glowing red in the golden brazier.

"...I don't know."

His torturer sighed.

"Then your penitence can't stop."

With that, he took the blade out of the fire and brought it to Sunny's chest, where an aching heart was beating wildly like a caged beast.

Sunny searched his memory, desperate for the torture to end. No, no… he couldn't remember!

A split second before the tip of the blade cut his skin, he suddenly shouted:

"Shadow! Shadow stole it! The ember knife… Shadow took it from me! It was his fault! His!"

The blade froze without reaching Sunny's flesh.

The torturer looked away, a somber expression on his face.

"...It is good that you finally spoke. However… that mystery had been revealed some time ago. After all, Shadow is long dead."

He glanced at Sunny, then asked coldly:

"But what of the other? Where is the ivory knife that I have given you? Did Shadow steal it, as well?"

Sunny shivered, then slowly shook his head.

"No… I... I hid it. I hid it far away."

His brother closed his eyes.

"Where did you hide it?"

Tears streamed down Sunny face. He strained in his bindings, desperately trying to free himself.

"I… I don't remember… I don't know!"

The torturer sighed, then dropped the searing blade to the ground.

"...Useless. This is all useless. A century of this, and you are still resisting!"

He grabbed his head and groaned, then suddenly laughed, his voice echoing from the stone walls of the dungeon.

"I'm tired… I'm more tired of this than you are, brother. Why have you deserted me? I can't save you, no matter what I do. I can't clear away your guilt, I can't redeem you in the eyes of the Lord!"

He fell silent, and slowly, his face turned calm and solemn.

Then, he glanced at Sunny and said, mad resolve shining in his eyes:

"A century is enough. Going further will only break what is left of you, my dear brother. If we can't redeem your sin, then… then, we must burn it away. The blessing of the Fire… we will invent our own instead of the one you lost!"

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A day finally came when Sunny was freed from his bindings and dragged away from the dungeon cell. He was too weak to fight his jailers, and saw no point in it. He didn't really understand what was happening and was just glad to finally leave the darkness of the torture chamber.

He was so happy that tears fell from his amber eyes.

Sunny was brought to a vast chamber that was full of terrible heat and drowned by an angry orange glow.

'...Strange… what a strange place…'

In front of him was a giant pit filled with molten steel. There were giant furs blowing a constant stream of wind into the fire below. He heard the sound of hooves ringing on the stones and saw a mighty horse with blinders on his eyes walk constantly in circles, spinning the wooden wheel it was attached to, which in turn worked the furs.

In front of the pit, a strange iron cage lay on the floor. It was made in the shape of a man's body and opened, revealing the human-shaped emptiness within.

'What... is this?'

"Be brave, my brother."

Sunny flinched, hearing the familiar voice. He turned his head and saw the torturer standing beside him, with a dark and determined expression on his face.

"Today, we will burn away your sin… we will make you into the tool of the gods once more."

'I don't… understand.'

Before Sunny could realize what was happening, he was placed into the strange cage, which was then closed shut, leaving him in utter darkness. His new prison hugged his body like a metal carapace. He couldn't move, or see anything. He was like a soul encased inside the body of an iron man.

Panicking, Sunny tried to struggle against his metal prison, but it was of no use.

He heard the sound of chains, and felt himself being raised into the air.

'W—what...'

And then, he was lowered down… down, down… down into the giant pit of molten metal.

The outsides of his cage grew hot, and then searing.

And then, scorching, incinerating, immolating.

Locked within the incandescent iron cage, Sunny screamed and screamed, his flesh constantly burning and restoring itself, his broken mind drowning in agony and heat… in the fire.

But no matter how much he screamed…

The burning was eternal.

Just like he himself was...

***

Burning… he was burning!

Sunny woke up with a scream, still enveloped in the horror of the nightmare. He shuddered, then clutched at his chest, which was full

of sharp, tearing pain.

"Argh!"

The shadows rustled around him, distressed by the sudden scream of their master.

'A nightmare… huh. I haven't had one in centuries.'

He grimaced, and then stood up, listening to the rattling of the heavenly chains in the distance.

It was time to face a new day…

Hopefully, his last.

# Chapter-638: Dream After Dream

Sunny walked through the empty halls of his castle, shrouded in shadows. Wherever he passed, the pale radiance of moonlight disappeared, devoured by the tide of flowing darkness. His steps were silent, and so were his thoughts.

Raising a hand clad in a glove of black silk, he traced his fingers across the intricate engravings, not caring to remember the events depicted on the ancient stone walls. They were his triumphs and his victories, etched into the annals of history… but all of it was so distant and had happened so long ago, at the dawn of the Age of Heroes.

He had been a hero once, too, battling the remnants of the Corruption across the mortal realms. He had been cunning and fearless, valiant and unrelenting, full of faith and hope.

…The Age of Heroes was over, but Sunny still remained.

By now, all of his servants and warriors had long left, taking the treasures he did not care about anymore with them. The halls of the castle were populated by shadows, and nothing else.

Well… except for one loyal fool who was too stubborn to get the hint.

'Sorry, kid. You should have found a better master…'

Damnation… why did his heart suddenly hurt so much?

Sunny opened the gates to the courtyard, not bothering to close them as he left. This castle of his would be, without a doubt, overtaken by one of the other Chain Lords soon enough. Or maybe even a ragtag

gang of random bandits… he did not care too much about it, either.

Standing in the darkness, Sunny hesitated, and then took out two knives from the hidden sheathes on his forearms. One seemed to be cut from a single piece of ghostly glass, the other from beautiful ember.

One was the knife entrusted to him by the Lord of Light, and the other was the one he had stolen.

The nightmare he had seen must have been because of a sense of guilt he had not known he felt. But why would he? The fool only had himself to blame for losing the knife to Sunny.

And surely, the two brothers were not demented enough to come up with something that distasteful… at least not yet.

Sunny sighed and shook his head, indifferent to the fate of the other immortals. Then, he turned slightly and watched as a tall figure appeared from the darkness.

A towering demon with pale grey skin, four arms, and twisting horns approached him and bowed his head, a sorrowful expression contorting the bestial lines of his face.

Sunny smiled.

"Don't look so glum, kid. You knew that this would happen eventually."

The demon didn't answer.

…Not that he was able to.

With another sigh, Sunny hid the ember knife in its sheath, and handed the glass one to the tall creature, who hesitated for a few moments and took it with fear and reverence.

"Be careful not to drop it. A god made that knife, you know? It is a very precious thing… precious enough that even you aren't suited to wield it. The others will eat you alive if they ever find out."

He looked northeast, considering something, and then added.

"...Take it to the Temple of the Chalice and give it to the War Maiden. Tell her... tell her that we'll meet again, in the Realm of Shadows. That is my last order to you, kid. After that, you will be free."

The demon clenched his fists, then slowly shook his head.

Sunny chuckled.

"And yet, this is how it has to be. Now, go! Your master commands you!"

The creature looked down, then growled sorrowfully, and disappeared into the darkness.

Sunny watched him go. Soon, the towering demon left the castle, crossed the hills of emerald grass, and climbed down to one of the chains leading away from the island.

Making sure that the creature was gone, Sunny recalled his shadow scouts and then clicked his tongue.

"Tsk. He didn't even look back once. What a heartless little imp…"

With that, he walked toward the gates of the castle, followed by a sea of shadows.

As he walked, a beautiful black stallion rose from them, his mane as dark as night, with long horns protruding from his head and his teeth resembling that of a wolf more than that of a normal horse.

The stallion's eyes burned with menacing crimson flames.

Sunny smiled.

"Greetings, old friend. Will you let me ride on your back one last time?"

He jumped into the saddle, and sent his terrifying steed galloping across the land. They flew through shadows and raced across the chains that swayed between two lightless skies, jumping from one

island to another, full of bliss and exhilaration of speed.

'Ah… this is the one thing I will miss.'

After centuries of being burdened by the crushing weight of knowledge and duty, Sunny was finally free, and at peace. The night sky above him was vast and beautiful, and so was the one below.

Everything was perfect… except for one thing. Why did his heart have to hurt so much?

Surely, he didn't have any regrets left…

Just before dawn approached, they reached a secluded and lonesome island. Sunny jumped off the horse, patted him on the back, and said his farewells. The steed then turned into a vast, sprawling shadow and disappeared, as though he had never existed at all.

The black stallion even made an attempt to hide his heartbreaking grief, to not burden his creator with it, and not turn their final farewell bitter.

Sunny remained still for a few moments, and then made his way to the edge of the island.

There, he undid the strings of his tunic and bared his chest, then knelt, looking down into the endless darkness of the Sky Below, the divine flames burning in its depths.

The others didn't know yet what awaited them all… none except for maybe Solvane, who had sealed their fates with her merciless hand. Had she known the consequences of her cruel choice? Or had she been simply too blind to see?

In any case, Sunny wanted no part of what was to come. He had always prided himself on being a cheat and a coward, and so, he chose an easy way out.

…The moon was already gone, and the sun had not yet risen. In this darkest of hours, he was surrounded by nothing except shadows and the singing of the wind.

A deep sigh escaped from his lips.

"...came like dew, disappears like dew."

With that, Sunny raised his hand and, without even flinching, thrust the beautiful ember knife through the intricate scales of the serpent that coiled around his chest.

As terrible pain drowned his mind with agony, a pale smile appeared on his face.

"Free... I am... finally... free..."

His body swayed, and then fell down into the endless abyss of the Sky Below, disappearing from the edge of the island just as the first ray of sunlight appeared over the horizon.

Sunny fell into absolute darkness.

Wrapped in its soothing embrace, finally, he died.

***

Sunny woke up. His chest hurt, for some reason... but he couldn't allow himself to sleep any longer.

It was time to face a new…

'...What the hell? Doesn't… doesn't this seem awfully familiar?'

# Chapter-639: Neverending Nightmare

Sunny woke up from a nightmare where he was a shadow that had lost the will to live, who woke up from a nightmare where he was a prince being drowned in a fiery tomb of molten steel, who woke up from a nightmare where he was an old man dying as he held the body of his murdered mother, who woke up from a nightmare where he was a mortal watching his world being destroyed by a god.

Soon enough, Sunny found himself tied to a stake, with fire spreading through the pile of tinder beneath his bare feet as a crowd of people whom he had considered friends and neighbors watched with demented glee. All he could do was struggle desperately against his bonds and pray that the smoke would smother him before the flames reached his flesh…

But his prayers were not answered.

Screaming from inside the fire, he died.

…It was time to face a new day.

Sunny fought desperately as sharp fangs tore his flesh apart, as he was being eaten alive. But no matter how much he struggled, it was of no use. The monster was just too strong, and mad, and cruel.

And then, he died.

It was time to face a new day again.

Sunny drowned, a heavy chain tied around his legs.

Sunny bled to death on a battlefield, suffering from terrible thirst and too weak to move, hungry crows tearing at his face with sharp beaks.

Sunny watched his entire family be executed before being hanged from the walls of a somber fortress.

Thrown into the boundless darkness of the Sky Below by his heartless mother, Sunny died of hunger, thirst, and fear, too tired to scream or cry.

Sunny was killed and turned into a wooden doll by a vengeful sorcerer, and then killed again after an eternity of silent servitude, the doll burning to ashes as it fell into an ocean of white flames.

His heart was pierced with an obsidian knife on an altar made of pure darkness.

His body was cleaved apart by the blade of a giant warrior in a red tattered robe while the jubilant crowd cheered from the stone seats of an ancient theater.

…It was time to face a new day again.

The nightmares never ended, bleeding into one another. Each time, Sunny woke up sure that the agony he had experienced was just a harrowing dream. But very soon, his waking life would turn into pure horror itself.

And then, he would die.

And then, it would be time to face a new day again.

Sunny dreamt of being mighty and weak, young and old, men and women, humans and beasts. Their end was always the same. Everywhere he went, everywhere he fled, no matter who he was, there was only pain and death.

And madness. It was as though everyone he met was infected by a terrible, unexplainable madness.

The whole world was mad…

And he was slowly going mad, too.

After a while, he found that waking up was getting harder and

harder. Sometimes, he failed to differentiate which of his lives were real, and which ones he had just dreamt of. Even though the horrors he had experienced seemed like a nightmare, their weight accumulated, slowly breaking his spirit apart. His faces changed, his memories changed, but one thing always remained the same.

The terror.

The everpresent, chilling terror of waking up from a nightmare only to be thrust into a worse one instead.

…And two other things remained the same, as well. The pain in his chest, and the spheres of light that he saw from time to time burning inside someone's soul.

Sunny was a soldier in a war between the Ivory City and the Red Colosseum. Consumed by terror, he watched as a brilliant colossus made of lustrous steel stepped forward, making the whole island shake. A giant metal hand slowly moved forward, catching a swift flying ship and crushing the vessel in its enormous fist.

And then, the iron giant took another step…

Suddenly, the sky disappeared, replaced by a vast expanse of polished metal. The colossus brought his foot down, crushing Sunny, and all of his comrades, into a bloody paste.

Sunny died…

And then, he woke up with a scream.

It was time to face a new day again.

'That… that was too much.'

He shivered, remembering the terrifying sight of the steel giant advancing toward the trembling row of soldiers. Who would be mad enough to challenge the indestructible Sun Prince?

Well… he knew who. The Warmongers were all insane, each and every one of them. Some said that they had been different and called by another name once, that they had been valiant and brave.

Champions who protected the Kingdom of Hope from the beasts of Corruption…

But he didn't really believe it.

As long as Sunny was alive, and as long as his father was alive, and his grandfather as well, the Warmongers had been the same. Bloodthirsty monsters wearing human skins…

Luckily, the war was raging far away from here. In the northern reaches of the Kingdom of Hope, people didn't have to worry about the madness of the followers of War, and the misguided righteousness of the followers of Sun.

…Granted, they had their own worries.

Shuddering and still in the grasp of the nightmare, Sunny massaged his aching chest and rose. Today, his lady was going to meet with the emissaries of the Night Temple. It was a high honor, but also not without risk. As a knight tasked with protecting her, Sunny had to be ready for anything.

'Why… why does my heart hurt so much today?'

Shivering, he reached for his clothes.

***

"No!"

Sunny and a young girl in a beautiful silk dress that was passed down to her from her mother, and for that reason a little bit too long for the girl's awkward figure, had nowhere else to run.

The pursuers, who had already slaughtered the rest of their party, chased them to the very edge of the island. Now, there was nothing but the darkness of the Sky Below in front of them.

…And behind them, steel hooves were already ringing on the stones, growing closer and closer.

The teenage girl stared into the bottomless abyss, then turned to him.

Her lips trembled.

"Sir… what… what should we do?"

Her face was soft and pale, not yet touched by the sharpness of maturity. Her eyes, usually so gentle and bright, were now dull and full of fear.

Sunny hesitated, then drew his sword and turned his back to the abyss.

"...Don't be afraid, my lady. I'm with you."

He said those empty words, knowing full well that it was a lie. He was just one man… he was not even an Awakened. What could a mundane swordsman like him do against this foe?

The girl, young as she was, knew that he was lying, too.

A few moments before the first of the pursuers appeared from the darkness, she grabbed his forearm and looked at him with desperate resolve.

"You… don't let them... don't let them take me alive, sir. Please…"

Sunny gritted his teeth, remained silent for a second, and then slowly nodded.

His heart hurt... it hurt so much. The pain was almost blinding.

A second later, a mightly black stallion appeared in front of them, bearing an armored rider on his back.

The rider jumped down, moving with a speed that no mundane human could ever hope to match. He unsheathed his own sword and glanced at Sunny, his eyes hidden behind a visor of a menacing black helmet.

His voice sounded like a voice of an ancient monster:

"...Step aside, warrior. We only need the maiden. You can still walk away alive."

Sunny laughed.

Ah, why did his heart hurt so much… dying was already painful enough.

He looked at the Awakened hunter in front of him, then at the young girl he had sworn to protect…

'Why does this nightmare never stop?'

...And then, he lowered his sword, and stepped aside.

Both of them looked at him, the pursuer with dark amusement, his lady with shock and disbelief. Her voice trembled:

"Sir, what… what are you doing?"

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then sighed.

'Why is this world so insane?'

"I am very sorry, my lady. Please, don't hold a grudge against me. But, you see… how do I say this…"

He looked at her, then in the direction of the Awakened hunter. Then, he shook his head and said:

"I am pretty sure that you are not real…"

# Chapter-640: World That Has Gone Mad

Sunny looked at the terrified young girl, and then… laughed.

...His laughter sounded more than a little bit unhinged.

His lady shuddered:

"Sir, you… you…"

Sunny waved a hand in the air.

"No, no. No need… I understand. I sound crazy."

The night sky above them was covered in an impregnable veil of clouds, and the one below them was empty and dark. The ancient stones they stood upon were slick with rainwater, and it was too dim to see anything except for vague silhouettes.

The silhouette of the Awakened hunter was towering, menacing, and embodied the very concept of terror.

But Sunny didn't care that much.

Massaging his chest, he smiled crookedly and said, his voice hoarse and raspy:

"...But then again, this whole world is insane. Someone told me once… ah, I don't quite remember who… that we can only reflect what is in front of us. Is it my fault that there is nothing in front of me except for madness?"

He looked down, his smile turning into a wicked grin.

"And someone else once told me that they wanted to destroy the

world. Back then, I thought them insane… I think… but now, I wonder…"

The Awakened hunter took a step forward, his monstrous voice permeating the darkness like an insidious murmur:

"Weak… so weak… his mind is broken..."

Sunny laughed again.

"Ah, yes… I am very, very weak. But I am not weak enough, I guess? Somehow, I have a feeling that I wasn't supposed to be able to last that long. Who would be able to endure that much pain, that much horror, and that much suffering without losing their mind completely?"

He glanced at his sword, then at the approaching enemy.

"And yet, I did. Actually, while some of those nightmares… gods, how cruel they were… did hit a nerve, overall… I am surprised to admit that... they really weren't that bad."

Sunny stared at the Awakened hunter with a concerned expression, then scratch the back of his head.

"Crazy, huh? It is almost as if after you have already been gutted once, nothing else can impress you that much. Or if you have already watched your mother die once, the second time won't be as… well… maybe it would? I don't know… I am a bit confused about what is real, and what is not. Maybe I am myself not real. There's one thing I'm sure about, though…"

The young girl slowly backed away from him, her face painted with fear. The Awakened killer tilted his head a little, then asked with curiosity:

"What?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Well, it's that, real or not, I am really... really, really hard to break. As it turns out. At least not to the point where I'll be unable to think.

And notice things. Oh, and I did notice a few things…"

He slowly raised his sword and pointed it at the approaching hunter.

"One thing I noticed is that my heart always seems to ache, doesn't matter whether it's in a nightmare or in the real life. So, that demands a question… if the heartache is the same, then maybe the nature of both the dream and the reality is the same, as well?"

He took a step forward, a confused expression on his face.

"The second thing I noticed was that many of my thoughts, actions, and reactions don't really make sense. Sometimes my hands will try to do something on their own, and sometimes fragments of feelings, ideas, and judgments that I have no cause to possess will just appear on their own. Easy to explain in a dream… not so much in the waking world. And I am awake, am I? Or am I? Or am I not?

Sometimes, it's hard to say…"

He laughed again and assumed a defensive position, waiting for the terrifying Awakened hunter to attack.

"Well, and the last thing I noticed were the radiant spheres of light I seem to be able to see inside the souls of living beings… or vile orbs of darkness in those of the Corrupted. It took me a few nightmares to realize that those were soul cores. Strangely, once again, this ability pursued me from the nightmares into reality, making the two seem so much alike.

So… with all that said… I am really only curious about one thing."

Sunny smiled, ready to meet his death… once more.

"You see… in my nightmares, I met all kinds of creatures. Awakened warriors, Corrupted monsters… even Transcendent immortals. Some of them had one soul core, some two or three…"

He lingered for a moment, and then looked past his enemy, at the mighty black steed standing motionless behind him, barely visible in the shadows.

"So, my question is… why does this damned horse always have six?"

...With that, he dashed in the opposite direction from where the hunter's sword flashed, abandoning the young girl he was sworn to protect without a second thought.

Sliding on the wet stones, Sunny dove under the flying blade and jumped to his feet, putting all of his weight into an attack of his own.

However, his strike was not directed at the menacing killer… instead, it was directed at the tenebrous steed.

Unobstructed, the tip of the sword touched the mighty beast's onyx coat… and shattered, as if striking adamantine stone instead of a living being.

In the next moment, the Awakened hunter's blade pierced him from behind, exiting out of Sunny's chest in a fountain of blood.

Ignoring the terrible pain and the blood that was flowing from his mouth, Sunny grinned and looked at the motionless horse.

The stallion looked at him back, his eyes dark and full of boundless, terrifying malevolence.

A gargling laughter escaped from Sunny's lips.

"Doesn't matter… it doesn't matter. Kill me again, bastard… kill me as many times as you want. In this nightmare, I am just a mundane swordsman… but in the next one, or the one after that, or the one after that… I'll be someone powerful enough to rip you to shreds. And then I will kill you again, and again… and again. Let's see which one of us is going to break first, you wretched pony!"

The black steed looked down at Sunny, his eyes igniting with ghostly crimson flames.

He snorted quietly, and then opened his mouth, full of sharp teeth that were more like those of a wolf than that of a horse.

And then, the Nightmare bit down on the trembling human's head, easily crushing it between his mighty jaws.

Sunny died.

And woke up with a tortured scream.

It was time to face a new day…

He rolled out of the dingy tent he had been sleeping in and grinned, mad sparks igniting in his dark eyes.

It was time to hunt an evil horse…

# Chapter-641: Dream Battle

Sunny and the diabolical steed of the fallen Shadow Lord battled across an endless tapestry of nightmares. Both were possessed by an insatiable desire to destroy the other, burning with bloodlust, fury, and relentless killing intent.

Their blood flowed across a hundred harrowing dreams, dissolving into the crimson rivers that had been spilled in the Kingdom of Hope across the centuries. As the weaker of the two, it was Sunny who bled most of the time… but every time he was torn apart and killed, he made sure to at least leave a mark on the stallion's tenebrous black body.

No matter how many times the damned horse killed Sunny, he had to share in the pain. Sunny was not only being hunted… no, he was a hunter himself. What did it matter how many deaths he experienced, what ghastly torments the nightmares held in store for him? In this realm of terrors, he was as immortal as the stygian steed. Every time he died, he was reborn anew.

And every time he was reborn, there was a chance of becoming someone — or something — that the infernal stallion would not be able to defeat. When that happened, their roles reversed, and it was the black horse that had to suffer, be broken, and die by his hand.

Every kill filled Sunny's soul with jubilant, dark glee.

He didn't care about dying over and over again, about witnessing atrocious horrors and experiencing the worst cruelty a person could imagine. He wasn't even sure that he was a person, after all. But no matter who or what he was, Sunny was content to endure as much agony as there was, as long as he could make the dark courser feel it too.

Neither of them could die in the dream, so this battle was going to be

decided by the tenacity of their wills.

They were going to see whose spirit would break first…

Sadly, the opportunities to really hurt the shadow steed were few and far between. Across all of the history of the Kingdom of Hope, there were not that many creatures that could challenge his vicious strength, and even less that Sunny was fortunate enough to inhabit in their darkest moment of despair.

That was not to say that his hunt was without success.

After giving in to madness and abandoning faith in the reality of the nightmares, and of his own memories, Sunny was left with a gaping emptiness in place of where his identity was supposed to be. He knew very few things about who he really was, and didn't really care to know more.

It held no meaning for his goal of tormenting and killing the black horse, over and over again… nevertheless, a few constant things soon revealed themselves.

His aching heart, his gift of gazing into the very souls of living beings… and his name. That was the only thing he managed to remember…

Lost from Light.

That was his name, and that was who he was.

After Lost from Light managed to remember his name, it acted as an irresistible anchor that slowly pulled other things from the darkness of oblivion that shrouded his true self. Not actual memories, but far more useful things… skills, fragments of knowledge, insights, patterns of thought…

Just like a body had a memory of its own, a soul had one as well. Knowing one's name, the true name, was a key to unlocking it.

So, he wasn't completely helpless against the infernal steed.

What's more, Lost from Light discovered that he had a strange

aptitude for this harrowing dream battle of theirs. Waking up in a new body after each death — be it a man or a woman, a child or an elder, a human or a beast, a mundane creature or an Awakened one that possessed unique and unexplainable powers — would have been utterly confusing and debilitating for any warrior.

How could one fight if they didn't know themselves?

But his mind possessed a remarkable flexibility to it, an insidious ability to adapt to any circumstance almost in an instant, as though it was formless and shapeless by nature, and thus easily molded to fit any situation.

Lost from Light found out that he could masterfully wield a large number of weapons regardless of whom he was reborn as, as though he had fought in countless battles before. He was able to learn to wield any other by simply observing his enemies for a few moments. He could easily peer through their technique and intentions, and use that knowledge to destroy them.

When he was reborn as a fearsome creature, he could almost instantly understand how to use his bestial body to rip the enemies to shreds, as though he had lived countless lives as countless monsters.

But, most importantly, he found out that fighting against those who were stronger than him was his second nature. Lost from Light's mind was full of treachery and cunning, which he could use to deliver terrible wounds to the fearsome stallion even when their might was vastly incomparable.

And so, they hunted and killed each other through numerous nightmares, waiting to see which one would break first under the weight of hopelessness and neverending suffering.

Lost from Light wouldn't break.

...But the damned horse refused to break, too.

The black steed was as resilient as he was, as stubborn, as willful, and as ruthless. It endured the endless stream of wounds and deaths Lost from Light delivered upon him with the same unbreakable

determination, his hatred and murderous fury only growing stronger.

The courser possessed an evil will and a devious mind of his own. He was ready to suffer terrible torment for eternity, too, as long as it meant destroying his enemy over and over again. Not caring about the agony, the stallion seemed darkly content to share it with his feral prey, as well.

The black steed was as mad as Lost from Light was.

Neither of them gave up, no matter how many times they were mangled, mutilated, ripped apart, and killed.

Neither of them broke.

…So, in the end, it was the neverending nightmare that had to fracture and fall apart instead.

# Chapter-642: Rude Awakening

Bloodied and crazed, Lost from Light dragged his body across a vast plane of weathered stone, his sword scraping on the black rocks. Behind him, the shattered remains of a warship were being consumed by fire, painting the darkness of the night with an angry orange glow.

…In front of him, some distance away, a beautiful black steed stood on shaky legs, red foam falling from his mouth. The eyes of the tenebrous beast shone with a dreadful crimson light, but behind the boundless fury and hate, a deep sense of exhaustion hid there, mixed with confusion, resentment, and pain.

Lost from Light grinned.

"What... what are you waiting for? Come here! Come and take me, wretch!"

The stallion breathed heavily, streams of searing steam escaping from his nostrils. He snorted with anger, then lunged forward, lowering his head to skewer the enemy with sharp horns. His steel hooves rang sonorously, causing swarms of red sparks to fly off the ancient stone, and his black mane waved in the wind like a stream of pure darkness.

They clashed beneath the empty night sky…

And then, Lost from Light died.

…Or so he thought.

Instead of dissolving into darkness and being reborn into a new nightmare, he fell to the ground, causing the whole world to shudder.

'What is this? Am I finally done for?'

He thought that he saw strange tears appear in the very fabric of

reality...

And then, reality crumbled like a vast black veil. Everything around him — the stone island, the burning debris of the broken ship, even the lightless black sky — rippled and swayed, as a silk curtain that was being crumbled by an invisible, giant hand. A moment later, torn and broken, that curtain fell apart.

…It was a magnificent sight, to see a whole world disintegrating right before your eyes.

Some time later, Lost from Light found himself in a boundless darkness, surrounded by pure nothingness. His pain was no more… in fact, he didn't even seem to possess a body. Instead, he had turned into a formless shadow, with three orbs of black fire burning furiously in its depths.

Lost from Light laughed.

"What happened? Don't tell me… don't tell me that you ran out of nightmares, beast! Oh, what will you do now?!"

Instead of a response, something moved in front of him… behind him… all around him.

Out there in the darkness, there was another shadow. But this one… this one was deeper, vaster, and much more ancient.

It was full of malevolence and hatred.

As his voice echoed in the nothingness, the vast shadow suddenly surged forward, enveloping him.

And then…

Lost from Light… Sunny… woke up.

***

Sunny rolled out of the bed, clutching at his chest. His gauntlet scraped against the onyx metal of the Mantle of the Underworld, and in the next second, he fell onto the cold stone floor, looking around

wildly, his eyes full of confusion and fear.

'W—where am I? Another nightmare?'

He saw a terrifying snake coiled in a corner, pale moonlight glistening on its stygian scales, and a graceful knight in black armor standing guard at the door. For a moment, Sunny panicked, but then remembered who they were.

'...Saint? Soul Serpent?'

And then, he remembered who he was.

His pupils widened.

'I'm… awake.'

The fragmented memories of the countless nightmares drowned his mind, each one more harrowing than the other. Some of them were already fading away, like dreams usually did… but some remained, almost as vivid and vibrant — and terrible — as when he had lived them.

Sunny shuddered and let out a stifled shriek.

For a few moments, his sense of self grew fragile, the madness of his nightmare self clashing against his actual being. But then, the real him, the one that was an Awakened fighter instead of a nameless being locked inside a neverending wheel of torturous nightmares, won over and absorbed the other… somehow.

It was a proper mess.

But Sunny had no time to pay a lot of attention to the chaotic and, without a doubt, dire process of his different divergent selves melding together.

Because, as soon as he fell to the floor, he heard the painfully familiar sound... loud, threatening... drawing closer and closer.

The ringing of steel hooves on cold stone.

'How…what…'

He was too disoriented and shell-shocked to gather his thoughts and understand what was happening.

He knew only one thing for sure.

...The damned horse was coming!

Saint suddenly raised her shield and stared at the door, while the Soul Serpent silently blended with the shadows.

Sunny was already trying to stand up, a desperate thought trying to form in his mind:

'Memory… I need to summon a Memory… I need a weapon…'

But he didn't get a chance to.

Just a moment later, the wall of the chamber suddenly exploded into a flood of stone shrapnel, and two furious crimson eyes appeared in the darkness behind it.

The black stallion… the Awakened Terror that had once been Shadow Lord's steed and companion… galloped into the chamber right through the stone wall and rammed into Sunny without slowing down one bit.

In the short moment before that happened, Sunny got a chance to get a good look at him. The creature appeared exactly as it had in the nightmares.

The stallion was tall and graceful, his coat as black as night and his eyes burning with menacing crimson light. Lean muscles rolled under his skin with each movement, making it glisten with dark luster. His hooves seemed to be forged out of somber adamantine metal, as were his curved horns and sharp, terrifying fangs.

The tenebrous steed seemed to be surrounded by shadows, his silhouette cloaked in their dark mantle. He was as beautiful as he was terrifying…

More importantly, the Terror was heading right for Sunny, with cold hatred burning in his dreadful eyes.

A split second later, the stallion rammed him at full speed.

'Argh!'

The black horns failed to pierce the stonelike metal of the Mantle of the Underworld, but Sunny felt as though he was hit by a speeding train. His armored body was raised into the air and flung backward.

The courser carried him forward on the sharp horns, and a moment later, rammed into the other wall of the room, shattering it with Sunny's back.

Sunny felt another terrifying impact, and his vision momentarily went black.

…Surrounded by a cloud of stone debris, the two of them — the demon and the Terror — fell out of the jagged breach in the keep's outer wall and into the cool night air, plummeting down from the height of the abandoned castle's main tower.

'Damned horse... why can't you just die?!'

# Chapter-643: Clash of Shadows

Sunny and the black steed plummeted down in a cloud of shattered stone. Far below them, the courtyard of the boundary fortress lay, shrouded in darkness. It was growing closer and closer, approaching with terrifying speed.

Neither paid it any attention, however.

The stallion bit down on Sunny's shoulder with all his might, his sharp fangs scraping against the stonelike metal of the Mantle of the Underworld. The fearsome onyx armor was an Ascended Memory of the sixth Tier, a whole Rank above the diabolical Shadow, so the courser was not supposed to be able to damage it.

However, to Sunny's shock and dismay, the metal plates actually groaned and bent, crushing his flesh. He roared with pain and anger, then thrust his four hands forward, ripping the Terror's chest with his claws.

Drops of blood fell down like rain.

Intertwined, the two of them hit the cobblestones of the desolate courtyard. However, instead of being broken by the fall, both simply submerged into the veil of shadows drowning it, as if the ancient stones had turned into a lake of liquid darkness.

For a moment, Sunny found himself floating in the tenebrous embrace of deep, unfathomable shadows. Usually, turning into a ghostly shade would have meant escaping to safety…

But today, his enemy was a similar creature himself.

A vast and terrifying presence lunged at him from the darkness, full of fury and boundless, chilling killing intent. The black steed had pursued him even into the shadows.

However, this time, Sunny was ready.

He had never fought anyone, or anything, as a shadow. But he had been attacked in this form twice, first by the Mirror Beast, and then by its insidious creator… Mordret of Valor, the Prince of Nothing. Both were able to steal his own ability, and use it against him.

What did it mean?

It meant that while Sunny could not damage mundane shadows, as Shadow Blade Kurt had been able to, he was capable of destroying other shadow creatures, just like they were capable of destroying him.

In his shadow state, Sunny was shapeless and formless… but that also meant that he could assume any shape and any form. It was just a matter of his will, mind, and imagination.

As the vast presence that was the nightmare steed lunged at him, he moved to meet it, turning into a long, narrow blade made of darkness. They clashed, tearing each other's souls apart. Sunny's whole being was instantly drowned by terrible suffering… but he also felt a silent scream of agony escaping from the rippling shadow that was trying to enshroud him.

Both the demon and the Terror were thrown back into the corporeal world, Sunny rolling away on the cold stones, the tenebrous steed sliding on them as his hooves struck sparks into the air.

'Kill… I'm gonna kill you, bastard… just you wait…'

Sunny roared and rose to his feet, outstretching one hand to summon the Cruel Sight, and another to summon the Moonlight Shard.

Two burning crimson eyes streaked through the darkness, and he was hit in the chest again. His lower hands grabbed the horns of the infernal stallion, and the Mantle of the Underworld suddenly grew as heavy as a mountain.

…That didn't slow down the courser one bit, however.

Together, they struck the wall of the dilapidated fortress. Sunny

shrieked, feeling his spine come very close to snapping. If not for Bone Weave, he would have undoubtedly been shattered into pieces.

The wall of the fortress was shattered instead.

A whole section of it cracked, and then crumbled, making the ground tremble as a vast cloud of dust rose into the air and blotted out the stars. The damned Terror carried him through the cloud, emerging from the other side of it a split second later, and then threw Sunny to the ground, trying to impale him with the horns.

But his enemy never let go of them, so instead, the four-armed demon was dragged across the emerald grass, tearing the soil apart. One of his hands flashed forward, piercing one of the stallion's eyes with a ghostly stiletto.

Or at least, trying to.

At the last moment, the black horse snapped its head sideways and bit down on the blade of the Moonlight Shard with his fangs, then jerked his neck and sent Sunny flying through the air.

'Damnation!'

Sunny spun in the air and landed on his feet, sliding back a dozen meters as the soles of his armored boots tore the ground. A moment later, he grasped the shaft of the Cruel Sight from the air and raised the somber spear, ready to strike the enemy.

…But the black steed had somehow disappeared and was nowhere in sight.

His vertical pupils narrowed, and then Sunny spun, sensing a swift and vast shadow circling him from behind.

The blade of the Cruel Sight suddenly shone with pure light, tearing the darkness apart. The nightmarish courser was forced back into the corporeal form, and instantly came under attack. The tip of the spear bit deep into his shoulder, causing more blood to fall on the grass.

Uncaring, the Terror twisted and shifted his weight, standing on his front legs as both hind ones were thrown into the air, drawn like

powerful springs.

Sunny shivered.

'Cra…'

In the next moment, the black horse struck backward with both legs, catching him square in the chest. The breastplate of the Mantle of the Underworld rang mournfully as a thin net of cracks appeared on it.

Stunned and blinded, Sunny was sent backward, flying above the ground with terrible speed. He collided against an ancient tree and went right through it, the thick trunk exploding into a cloud of splinters. Then, he hit the ground and bounced from it, flew some more, then crashed down again and rolled for dozens of meters, blood shooting out of his mouth.

'Hurt… argh, that hurt…'

His heart hurt, too.

It hurt way, way too much.

Gulping for air and unable to force it into his four lungs, Sunny shakily rose to his feet and stubbornly raised the Cruel Sight.

And then, the black steed shot from the darkness and rammed into him again.

…This time, both of them slid off the edge of the island.

# Chapter-644: My Enemy

Sunny and the stygian courser continued their battle in the darkness of the Sky Below, then fell on the swaying surface of a heavenly chain. Turning into swift shadows, they clashed again and again as they glided across its length with terrible speed, ripping each other's souls to shreds.

Traversing many kilometers in a matter of a dozen heartbeats, they emerged from the shadows and shot upward, then crashed on the surface of the next island, wrecking and destroying anything that appeared in their way.

The courser rammed Sunny again and again, carrying him further and further away through the night, not giving Saint and the Soul Serpent any chance to catch up. The stallion used his devastating hooves, his adamantine horns, and his sharp fangs… anything he had to deliver as much pain and damage to the wicked, tenacious, hateful enemy of his.

But Sunny was consumed with the same murderous fury. He returned the favor with his weapons, his claws, and his own fangs and horns as well, forgetting everything except for the crazed desire to obliterate his foe.

They rolled across the unfamiliar island like a wave of destruction and flew high into the sky — Sunny with the help of the Dark Wing and the Heavenly Burden, the Terror with the help of nothing but the force of his hind legs and the terrifying range of his dashing jump.

His fangs caught the fragile fabric of the transparent cloak, tearing it apart, and then both of them plummeted down once more, landing on another chain and instantly submerging into shadows.

Just like that, they fought without stop, overwhelmed by the maddening desire to destroy the enemy. When they clashed in their

corporeal forms, Sunny was always on the losing side, receiving more wounds and being thrown around like a tattered rag doll.

However, when they became shadows, he held the advantage. Despite the fact that the black steed was three whole Classes ahead of him, they were of the same Rank. And while the courser was a more ancient and powerful Shadow…

Sunny was a divine one.

Suffused with the flame of divinity, each of his attacks dealt more damage, and that damage was far more terrible, as well. His shadow form, while much smaller, was far more fathomless and resilient. Held together by the bond of a True Name, his soul was much harder to destroy.

They fought, and fought, and fought, flying through the night as their bodies became broken and bloodied, and their souls became tattered and torn.

And yet, neither was willing to give up. Neither was willing to let the enemy live.

Sunny had never experienced a battle that was so ferocious, swift, and devastating. Everything happened too fast, and hurt too much, for him to properly perceive and comprehend. At some point, he stopped trying to, giving in entirely to his intuition and battle instinct.

There was only one truth and one unbreakable law, after all.

He had to kill the enemy, and prevent the enemy from killing him.

Everything else was just noise.

…Finally, exhausted and covered in wounds, they reached a deserted island where nothing living dwelled or grew. Rolling on the ground, Sunny used two shadows to augment his mangled body, and the third one to serve as his second pair of eyes.

Deep in the battle trance of clarity, he was able to perceive the whole world as one interconnected picture, with each part of it existing

within the same complicated pattern as all the rest. His mind was forged into a single sharp edge, all of his thought dedicated to the battle, clear, purposeful. and swift.

He saw the silhouette of the infernal black horse approach him from the darkness, bloody foam streaming from the stallion's mouth, unshaken will burning in the dreadful crimson eyes.

By now, the two of them knew each other better than they knew themselves. After all, they had spent countless nightmares hunting and killing each other, only to continue the battle in reality after the nightmares could not keep up anymore.

They were evenly matched… the black steed was far more powerful and had experienced centuries of bloody battles, but Sunny was devious, cunning, and full of insidious treachery that made up for his lack of strength.

Neither could overwhelm the other, and at this point, both were probably going to die trying.

The steed seemed to be at peace with such an outcome. And Sunny... Sunny was too.

…He would have preferred to stay alive, though.

'Curse you…'

A low growl escaped from his lips, and then, Sunny suddenly dismissed his weapons, and even his armor, standing motionlessly under the starlit sky, his nakedness covered only by a crude loincloth.

Raising one hand, he massaged his aching chest, then bared his fangs in a dark grin and growled.

'Let us end this, then.'

The black steed stared at the hateful enemy for a few moments, and then lowered his head, starlight shining on the sharp tips of his horns.

And then, the courser charged forward, breaking the ground with the

push of his adamantine hooves.

Sunny lunged forward, as well.

He had only one gamble left. One desperate, devious trick…

Since he and the tenebrous stallion knew each other so well, he was going to try and turn into the Terror's shadow.

Using Shadow Dance against another shadow was a strange concept, since shadows were formless and shapeless by nature. How was he supposed to peer into the very essence of something that was shifting and everchanging?

Well… he was either going to do it, somehow, or die.

That was why Sunny had dismissed his armor and his weapons. The black stallion did not use any weapons or armor, after all… only his hooves, his fangs, his horns, his unbreakable will, and his furious desire to kill.

That was what Sunny had to use, too.

He recalled everything he could about the endless stream of nightmares… every torturous death, every indescribable torment, every excruciating loss he still remembered… and how his enemy had been in those vile dreams.

He remembered a similar deserted island, centuries ago, where the Shadow Lord said his last goodbye to his faithful steed, and their exhilarating ride across the night skies just before that.

He remembered every wound that the stallion had dealt him, and every wound that he had dealt in return.

...And then, he tried to use Shadow Dance like he had used it on countless humans and creatures before — only this time, peering even deeper, wishing to understand even more.

For a moment, it was as though Sunny himself became the stygian steed.

He felt it… the rage, the hatred, the dark resolve… but also, deep underneath it, boundless loneliness, sorrow, and longing.

Ah… what a terrible fate it was, for a shadow to walk the world without its master…

He saw himself wandering across the ruins of the Kingdom of Hope, mournful and lost, and then returning to the now empty fortress that had once been his home… his master's home… only to see it be overtaken and desecrated by marauding strangers.

He felt a deep, maddening rage, and gave in to this madness, letting it consume him.

And then, Sunny saw himself charging at a bloodied form of a four-armed demon.

He saw clearly what the black steed was going to do to kill him, a split second before it happened.

And so, he sidestepped the attack before it even came, raised his upper arms, locked his fists together, and brought them down with all the devastating, inhuman power he had.

The charge of the stallion missed, and instead, a terrible blow descended from above, landing on his spine and shattering it.

The black steed tumbled to the ground, suddenly paralyzed, and remained laying there, his side rising and falling shakily, his hoarse breathing slowing down and down…

Sunny fell, too.

'Ah… hell…'

It felt like he was dying, too.

The pain in his chest had finally grown intolerable, as if his heart finally reached its limit.

Turning his head, he stared at the dying horse, whose dreadful crimson eyes were slowly growing dim and cold.

After a while, the madness burning in them was extinguished, and a shadow of a new emotion appeared in them.

Confusion, pain… and sudden recognition.

The black steed breathed in one last time, then let out of quiet whine.

And died.

Sunny closed his eyes.

He was so, so tired.

'...I won.'

Well… then, maybe, it was time for him to die, too.

In the darkness, the voice of the Spell whispered into his ear, its voice soft and solemn:

[You have slain an Awakened Shadow, Nightmare.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

He felt a vast amount of shadow fragments flow into his cores, reinforcing them, and thought tiredly:

'Strange… that doesn't feel like just six of them…'

...But the Spell was not done speaking.

It remained silent for a moment, and then said:

[...You have received a Shadow.]

[Your Aspect Legacy mastery level has increased.]

[You have received the right to claim a Legacy Relic.]

Sunny weakly tried to smile.

'Such great news... this would have been great, if I was not dying.'

And then, a strange sound invaded his ears. It sounded like... like... the rustle of sails...

# Chapter-645: Facing a New Day

…There was warmth, sunlight, and the smell of fresh sheets, wood, and green leaves. Sunny slowly opened his eyes and felt the bed beneath him sway gently. No... the world itself had swayed.

It was time to face a new day.

Suddenly overwhelmed by terror, he sat up with a growl, his eyes wildly searching for the signs of danger, disaster, and death. His four hands rose, sharp claws ready to tear flesh apart.

'No, no, no… it was all a dream, I'm in the nightmare again! I never escaped!'

Panic washed over his mind, but then slowly receded.

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then lowered his gaze and stared at his four hands. Four… this was the shadow demon's body. He was awake. He was himself… well, the Nightmare version of himself… ah, it was all so convoluted…

He remembered the desolate fortress, the endless torments he had dreamt of, the fearsome battle with the black steed, and his eventual victory. The terrible pain of his last heart giving out.

…Tu-tum-tu-tump. Tu-tum-tu-tump. Tu-tum-tu-tump.

Hearing the strange sound, Sunny looked at his chest.

His three shadows were sprawled on the ground, so the rough skin of the shadow demon had lost its obsidian color and was back to its original complexion, as pale and grey as it had been back when he first entered the Nightmare. There was a thin, barely noticeable scar running vertically from his collarbone to his abdomen.

And beneath it… tu-tum-tu-tump… two mighty hearts were beating steadily, circulating rivers of blood through the gaunt, towering body of the four-armed demon.

He blinked a couple of times.

'I am… alive?'

Not only was he alive, but he also seemed to possess two perfectly healthy hearts.

Remembering something, Sunny shifted his gaze back to his hands and noticed that his two missing fingers were now back, be it of a slightly different color and seemingly carved out of ashen, polished wood. He tentatively made his hands into fists, and saw the wooden fingers bend as if they were no different from the other eighteen.

He could even feel the texture of the skin on his palms pressing against their tips. His two new claws were forged out of lusterless steel.

Finally, Sunny raised his eyes and looked around, trying to understand where he was.

The room he saw was not very spacious, but also not small. Its walls and ceiling were made out of wood, and so was the floor, hidden under an opulent plush rug. The bed he lay upon was sturdy and large, with a mattress so soft that it seemed like a cloud, and pristine white sheets covering it.

There were several pieces of luxurious furniture in the room, a pile of bright sitting pillows on the floor, a tray with succulent fruit on an intricate wooden table, and a large window on one of the walls, opening onto a breathtaking view of the boundless blue sky.

Despite the lavish decor, the room… felt familiar, somehow.

Sunny frowned.

'Wait a minute…'

Wasnt' there a room just like this, but far more dilapidated and

empty, on the ancient flying ship the Fire Keepers had repaired?

Suddenly, something clicked in his mind, and his vertical pupils narrowed.

'Noctis! That lying crook!'

Sunny was back onboard the magnificent sky vessel that had a beautiful tree growing around its mast… only that vessel had not been shattered and wrecked, then recovered and restored by Cassie's cohort yet.

It was still owned by its original captain — the great and powerful Sorcerer of the East, Noctis.

He must have picked Sunny up after the battle with the black steed and kept his promise, fashioning a new heart for the shadow demon's body, and even replacing the fingers Sunny had lost while trying to learn how to weave.

Which was very nice of him.

…But didn't mean that Sunny would not still enjoy ripping the bastard limb from limb!

'That lying sack of monster crap! Spend the night in the fortress, Sunless… what's the worst that could happen, Sunless! I'm going to strangle him!'

Sunny growled hatefully and clenched his fists, almost slicing his own skin apart with the claws. He was full of resentment, fury, and vengeful wrath…

However, after thinking about it for a few moments, he had to hide his fangs and make a sour face. Yes… the thought of making the deceitful sorcerer squirm felt very nice. But no matter how weak and affable Noctis seemed, he was an immortal Transcended, a Chain Lord of the Kingdom of Hope. Someone whose mere presence was enough to scare a terrifying Corrupted Monster away.

There were far more productive things in life than harboring thoughts of revenge against someone like that.

Besides, there was so much Sunny had to think about instead. The nightmares, the battle with the Shadow stallion, the rewards he had received after emerging victorious from it, his future plans and actions…

Sadly, he did not receive an opportunity to consider all these important and vital things.

As if summoned by Sunny thinking of his name, the damned sorcerer suddenly opened the door and entered the room, whistling a jolly tune under his nose.

Noctis was just as Sunny remembered him — carefree, pleasantly likable, and dressed in extravagantly colorful silk garments. His raven-black hair was immaculate and lustrous, and his beautiful grey eyes sparkled with jovial light.

Noctis saw the four-armed demon, and smiled brightly.

"Ah, Sunless! You're finally awake!"

Sunny stared at him, the corner of his eyes twitching.

'...Bastard. You have the audacity to smile at me after sending me to that hell?!'

He hesitated, then let out a low growl as a greeting.

Come to think of it... what, exactly, was the sorcerer planning to do with him now?

A vague memory of one of the nightmares suddenly entered his mind, one where he had been turned into an obedient wooden doll by a… by a… who had it been?

Sunny suddenly shivered.

Noctis continued to smile, and then said in a strange voice:

"Well then, since you're up… why don't you come with me, huh, Sunless?"

Sunny gulped.

Somehow, he felt that this invitation was not really something he could refuse…

# Chapter-646: Familiar Sights

Thinking that it was unwise to refuse the immortal sorcerer, Sunny rose from the bed and hesitated for a moment, noticing that he was completely naked. Numerous wounds that he had received in the Red Colosseum and later, in the battle with the black steed, had turned his grey skin into a map of scars, with lean muscles rolling under it like mountain chains.

Noctis gave him a funny look, then cleared his throat and pointed to a chair that had a black kimono hanging on its backrest. The garment was made out of silk, intricately stitched, and fit his towering figure perfectly. It even had four sleeves instead of two, revealing that someone must have sewn the thing specifically for him.

Feeling the cool caress of the soft fabric on his rough skin, Sunny covered his nakedness, fastened the belt around his waist, and then put on a pair of leather sandals.

Feeling somewhat like a proper human again… or rather, a proper demon… he then tied his wild black hair with a black ribbon and followed Noctis out of the room.

As they walked to the upper deck, the sorcerer couldn't help but throw glances at him, mumbling some nonsense in a barely audible voice:

"...wonderful… marvelous! My complexion is, without a doubt, the fairest there is in the Kingdom of Hope, but alas, black doesn't suit me at all. I won't be caught dead wearing black. Or alive, really. But this is just perfect! Finally, someone to do justice to this Night Silk I bought!

It must be fate, indeed, no doubt about it…"

Sunny stared at the immortal Transcendent with a concerned scowl

on his face.

The man was clearly a raving lunatic. Another one…

'Why the hell is everyone in this damned Nightmare insane?'

They walked onto the upper deck of the flying ship, where Sunny saw a somewhat familiar picture. There was a beautiful tree growing around the main mast, with the middle of the vessel drowning in the cool shade of its wide branches. The bark of the tree was ivory white, and its leaves were vibrant emerald in color.

The difference with how the flying ship had been in the future was that the original tree he was staring at right now was much taller, stronger, more robust… ancient.

Now that he had witnessed the consecrated grove of Heart God, Sunny easily recognized its origin.

...He also shuddered, remembering the nightmare in which he was reborn as an old man. That one… that one was perhaps the most terrible of them all. Mostly because it reminded him of his own past, his own mother. His own loss.

Noticing a subtle shift in the expression of the sullen demon and misunderstanding it, Noctis smiled proudly.

"Ah, yes. She's a real beauty! This noble ship is the last of her kind. An original! All those flying buckets the rest of them use are just crude imitations."

He patted the bark of the sacred tree in passing and continued forward, heading for the bow of the ship.

"You are probably too young to remember, Sunless, but a long time ago, the Sky Below was full of divine flame. Back then, there were fearless daredevils who dove down into the ocean of immolating fire to harvest some of it. This is the last remaining vessel of their fleet."

The sorcerer smiled.

"All the rest were turned to ash, along with their crews. Even the

memory of them is long gone. Shame… those guys were really something, the Fire Hunters. A fun crowd. Not very bright, though, which was how I got my hands on this beauty. Won her in a game of cards, and made some improvements."

He laughed.

"I am the best player in all of the Kingdom of Hope, you know! I even won that obsidian knife you carry once, from the One in the North. Oh, you should have seen her face when she had to give me the prize! That was back when she cared about such stuff, of course."

Sunny blinked and stared at the sorcerer, dumbfounded.

'No… no way. He won one of the seven knives by playing cards? The seven knives created by Sun God?!'

Noctis glanced at him and winked.

"Ah, yes, the rest of the Lords had the exact same expression you do right now. They were very angry with us two. It was a giant mess. Uh… I sort of lost that knife later on, though, so they mellowed out."

He grew silent for a bit, and then added, his voice a little darker:

"But these knives… they never really stay lost for long, you know. It's really, really hard to get rid of one. Impossible, in fact."

They continued forward in silence. Disturbed, Sunny turned away and looked over the railing of the flying ship.

It seemed that Noctis had not moved the vessel away from the deserted island where the battle between Sunny and the black stallion had ended. It was still below, empty except for a few jagged rocks laying here and there.

The only difference was that, now, there were beautiful white flowers growing from the soil where the drops of the lonesome steed's blood had fallen on it.

'A giant mess…'

Sunny knew that there were seven immortals created by the Lord of Light to guard — or rather, contain — Hope. Their strings were torn out of the tapestry of fate, made to loop endlessly onto themselves, and placed into seven strange knives. And so, the knives were both what made the Chain Lords eternal, and the only thing that could kill them.

Each of Hope's wardens was entrusted with the key to another's death. This was what kept the balance between them… so, of course Noctis had made a huge mess by managing to get his hands on a second one. No wonder the other Lords were angry.

Even though losing one of the knives was something only a complete idiot would do, in this instance, the sorcerer had been lucky enough to somehow manage such a feat. Otherwise, he might have found himself in hot water… or molten steel…

Sunny shuddered and closed his eyes for a moment.

Finally, they reached the bow of the ship and descended a set of stairs, eventually stopping in front of a heavily reinforced door that looked faintly familiar. Noctis unlocked the door, and invited Sunny inside.

There, Sunny saw armored walls, a high ceiling, and three chests standing in the center of the room.

Staring at one of them in particular, he suddenly paled terribly and took an involuntary step back.

Noctis glanced at him with confusion, then shook his head.

"You are very strange! Don't be afraid, these are just my treasure chests. They won't bite."

He thought for a second, and then gave one of the chests a playful kick.

"Well... except for this one. This one will eat you alive..."

# Chapter-647: Two Answers

Sunny stared at the painfully familiar chest, his black eyes full of fright and venomous resentment. Of course, he had recognized it instantly. It was his old nemesis, the Mordant Mimic… the vile creature that had almost eaten him alive once, in the distant future.

Granted, he had ended up being the one to feast on the flesh of the abomination, instead. Which had been a traumatic experience in and of itself.

But who was to say that he would be able to kill the Fallen Devil again? Sure, Sunny was much stronger and more experienced now. He had more cores, thousands more shadow fragments reinforcing them, much better equipment, and inhabited the body of an actual demon. But there was also no Crushing in this era to help him hold the creature down while the Broken Oath did its job.

Thankfully, the bastard seemed to be behaving itself, maybe out of fear of its master. Actually…

Sunny looked closer and frowned, noticing that the chest had only three soul cores, none showing any sign of Corruption. They were bright and pristine, just like that of any other creature following the path of Ascension. However, they were also too dim to be of the Ascended Rank.

The Mimic was neither Fallen nor a Devil yet. It was simply an Awakened Demon masquerading as a treasure chest.

Which was a bit of an improvement, but still didn't really explain why Noctis was using a powerful demon as a piece of furniture.

'I guess the Mimic grew stronger sometime in the future… and was also Corrupted, somehow.'

Sunny relaxed a little, but then his scowl deepened.

While Noctis opened one of the other two chests and started enthusiastically rummaging through it, two thoughts entered Sunny's mind.

One was very simple…

'Coins!'

However, no matter how alluring the image of the miraculous coins was, the second thought took precedence:

'What… the hell?'

Those words Noctis had just said… weren't they mentioned in the description of the Covetous Coffer? Yes, they were! So Sunny was, and had always been, the pale friend mentioned in it?

'Huh?!'

How could the Spell have known that this exact scene would play out, all that time ago? Back then, Sunny had not even known about the existence of the Nightmare Seed in the Ivory Tower, let alone harbored any thoughts of entering it.

There were two possible answers, both of them equally unnerving.

One was that the Nightmare was not, in fact, a recreation of the past. Instead, it was just… just the past. The Spell knew what Noctis was going to say because this conversation had already happened thousands of years ago, and possessed the power to send people back through time.

Sunny wasn't quite ready to believe that, though. Things didn't really add up... if each Nightmare allowed Awakened to travel through time and return to the past, they would have been able to cause changes in the present through their actions. There had not been too many Nightmares conquered since the spell had appeared, but also not that few. Hundreds at least, and maybe even thousands...

So, he was more inclined to consider the other answer.

The second answer had to do with the nature of the Spell and the domain of its alleged creator. Weaver was called the Demon of Fate for a reason, after all. Their mask allowed Sunny to steal a glance at the tapestry of fate, and see the past, the present, and the future of everything, all at the same time. Just one split second of this terrible knowledge had almost driven him insane.

Perhaps the Spell, which was woven out of those very strings of fate, was able to perceive the depths of the tapestry as well, and hence knew that it was Sunny's fate to enter the Nightmare, meet Noctis, and have this conversation in the treasury of the flying ship.

...That possibility was, perhaps, even more frightening.

'Damnation, my head hurts.'

The mystery of the seemingly innocuous description of the Covetous Coffer had turned out to hold a key to a very important piece of the grand puzzle, one that was too important to be considered hastily. The whole nature of the world as Sunny knew it could be changed entirely depending on which answer was true. He was going to have to think about it more, and later, in excruciating detail.

And speaking of excruciating…

Sunny lingered, then glanced at Noctis, suddenly remembering all the torment he had gone through because of that shameless crook. He gritted his teeth, thinking of all the ways he would have made the bastard pay, if he could…

The crook in question, meanwhile, smiled widely as he pulled a sparkling emerald medallion out of the chest and threw it to Sunny.

"Aha! There you are... here, catch!"

Sunny caught the medallion and studied it with a dubious expression. There seemed to be an almost invisible, intricate string of runes carved into the precious stone...

"What is this crook planning now, I wonder? Ah, I wish I could rip his flimsy body into tiny pieces, and listen to him scream. I would have started with the fingers, I think, and worked my way up. One little

piece at a time…"

Noctis stared at him with a strange expression, his face frozen.

Sunny frowned.

"Why is that idiot staring at me? Gods, what a lunatic. Huh? Wait a moment…"

He blinked.

"Why does it sound as if I'm speaking aloud? Damn, am I going crazy as well? Crazier, I mean."

The sorcerer cleared his throat, then cautiously hid his hands behind his back.

"Uh… yeah. That emerald trinket you are holding is a very rare and precious magical amulet. It can project someone's thoughts outward and vocalize them, turning thought into sound. So, uh… do stay away from my fingers, please. I am quite attached to them... unlike some people!"

Sunny paled.

"What?! No! He heard all that! Wait, crap… he heard that, too!"

He shuddered and hurriedly dropped the emerald amulet to the floor, then stared at it in abject horror.

Noctis smiled.

"Oh, Sunless… don't fret, my friend! I know it was just a bit of friendly teasing. I've heard way worse, anyway. You are actually a very restrained individual, as far as demons go."

He bent down, picked up the amulet, and offered it to Sunny with an innocent grin.

"So… how about we have a hearty meal and talk? There's so much we must speak about…"

# Chapter-648: With Good Intentions

A few minutes later, Sunny was staring at a table full of all kinds of delicious food. The table was situated on the upper deck of the flying ship, allowing for a breathtaking view of the shattered Kingdom of Hope below.

Being that high up in the sky, he couldn't help but feel a deep sense of discomfort. The fear of the Crushing was already deeply ingrained into his bones… however, the terrible curse that dictated the lives of everyone on the Chained Isles did not exist yet. He had nothing to worry about.

Or rather, he did not have to worry about that particular danger. There were plenty of other existential threats surrounding him, however.

The food had been served by obedient wooden dolls wearing tasteful silk liveries. Sunny was pretty sure that each of the animated mannequins had been a living creature once, their souls torn from their bodies and placed into the dolls by the person sitting across from him.

Taking a sip of a cooled wine, the person in question smiled brilliantly and gestured at the food.

"Come, Sunless! Enjoy."

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then reached out to put a few portions of several mouth-watering dishes onto his plate. He was careful not to touch the emerald amulet that lay in front of him, knowing that doing so would reveal all his thoughts to the damned sorcerer.

That thing… was maybe the greatest danger he faced. While the

ability to communicate with people was something he had been thinking about from the first day of entering the Nightmare, sharing his every thought was not something Sunny was ready to deal with yet.

His Flaw had been constraining what he was able to say for a long time now, so his mind was a kind of safe haven for Sunny. For that reason, he had developed a tendency to run wild with his thoughts… revealing them all to a mad sorcerer was not a very great idea.

Noctis watched him eat with a carefree smile, then said in a friendly tone:

"By the way, great job killing that nasty horse! What a feat! What a gallant deed! Truly, vanquishing it was an exploit worthy of being sung about. But, Sunless…"

The sorcerer hesitated for a moment, then leaned forward and asked with a bit of exasperated desperation in his voice:

"Please tell me, why... why, for the love of the gods, did you kill the horse?!"

Sunny, who was taking a sip of cold water, spat it all out.

Coughing, he stared at Noctis with murderous fury burning in his bestial black eyes, then ground his fangs and put his palm on the emerald amulet.

"...What the hell do you mean, why did I kill the horse?! You were the one who sent me into his damned lair! The horse was this close to becoming the end of me, what else was I supposed to do?!"

Then, he clenched his four fists and growled.

"The nerve of this bastard!"

Sunny, of course, meant for that last thought to remain unsaid, but sadly, one of his fists was still touching the enchanted amulet.

Noctis looked at him, blinked a few times, and then flung his hands into the air.

"I never meant for you to fight it! Do I look like an idiot? That horse destroyed hundreds of creatures much scarier than you, why would I send a mere demon to battle it?!"

Sunny opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again. Finally, he hissed:

"Yes. I don't know. Why did you send me into the fortress?"

The sorcerer gulped down his wine, remained silent for a bit, then let out a bitter sigh.

"Oh, well… you know… I just thought that since you are both shadow creatures, it might have liked you. Didn't you know each other back when your master was still around?"

Sunny looked at the beautiful immortal for a few moments, then trembled slightly and covered his face with two hands.

'That damn fool…'

This time, he was careful to not touch the amulet while thinking that.

The worst part of all of it… was that Noctis was not entirely unfounded in thinking that the black steed would not attack Sunny. The body he was currently inhabiting had, indeed, been acquainted with the stallion centuries ago, back when their Lord had been alive.

The problem was that Sunny had replaced the four-armed demon, and thus had no memory of knowing the black courser, while the courser himself had gone mad during the hundreds of years of solitude and only recognized his old companion seconds before death, when his madness receded for a few short moments.

So, all that horror, all the pain and torment he had gone through in the nightmares… was the result of a tragic and cruel twist of fate. It was just a series of wicked and disastrous coincidences, nothing more, and nothing less.

Sunny let out a low growl.

'...Forget it. It doesn't matter, anyway. Not now, and not anymore.

The important part is… Noctis might look like an eccentric idiot, but he is anything but. If he wanted me to reunite with Shadow Lord's steed, there was a reason for that. What does he really want?'

He hesitated, then placed his hand back onto the amulet.

"...Why did you want me to meet that thing?"

The sorcerer remained silent for a bit, then smiled charmingly.

"Oh, right. By any chance… before you killed it… has Nightmare shared anything with you? The location of a certain glass knife, for example?"

Sunny snorted.

"Ah. So that's what all of this is about."

He took a bite out of a loaf of delicious freshly baked bread, chewed it unhurriedly, thinking about nothing at all, and then responded in a calm tone:

"Sure, there is something that I learned. Why?"

Noctis cleared his throat, glanced at the scenery, then back at Sunny. Finally, he said with a bit of visibly forced indifference.

"Oh? Well… would you mind sharing?"

Sunny stared at him for a bit, then grinned.

…With his bestial face and two rows of sharp fangs, that grin looked truly frightening.

"Would I mind, huh? That depends. Why do you want that knife?"

Noctis smiled with his usual carefree attitude, then waved his hand dismissively.

"Ah, it's nothing much. A small thing, really… you see, I just want to gather the knives, start a war against both the Ivory City and the Red Colosseum, kill all of the Chain Lords, defy the Lord of Light, break

the will of gods, and release the Demon of Desire out of her prison. And then maybe have a cup of tea.

The sorcerer grew silent for a moment, and then added thoughtfully:

"Actually, on second thought, maybe I'll have the tea first…"

# Chapter-649: Kingdom of Madness

Sunny stared at the immortal sorcerer, stunned by those words. The scale and scope of the bloodshed and adversity Noctis was striving for were… were simply beyond comprehension. And yet, he had confessed this terrible desire with the same carefree, nonchalant, jovial attitude… as though he was indeed talking about brewing tea instead of waging war on four deathless Saints and their armies.

Sunny remembered the first time he saw Noctis… bloodied, crestfallen, sitting motionlessly in front of the fire with a diamond sickle laying at his feet, its blade marred with crimson.

A grim and somber thought formed in his mind all by itself:

"Insane… you are insane. All of you are…"

He flinched, then removed his trembling hand from the emerald amulet.

Noctis threw his head back and laughed, as if he heard the funniest joke in the world. The silent sailor dolls stood around him, motionless, staring into emptiness with their crudely carved eyes. The scene that was strange and fantastical a few moments ago suddenly seemed threatening and eerie.

After a while, the sorcerer grew quiet, then glanced at Sunny with a mischievous smile and asked:

"Yes, indeed. I could not have said it better myself. All of us are insane. But don't… don't you get it yet, Sunless? Don't you understand why?"

Sunny frowned, then shook his head.

'What the hell is he trying to say?'

How was he supposed to know why everyone in this damned Nightmare seemed completely mad…

And then, something moved in his mind. A seed of a thought… a nascent hint of understanding.

His pupils narrowed slightly.

There was something... strange about the Kingdom of Hope. He had first sensed it after escaping the Red Colosseum and facing Solvane, that beautiful and utterly demented fiend… her actions made a perverse, and yet perfect sense. But there was still something wrong about her.

Back then, he had felt a vague suspicion. Something seemed out of place, something didn't make sense. And after, when he had been thrust into the neverending nightmares, this feeling only grew stronger. He just had no time to think about it.

Everyone here seemed slightly… or greatly… off. Every emotion was sharper and cut deeper, every vice or virtue grew out of control until it turned into a destructive obsession. He had experienced it all, lived through all of it in the nightmares over and over again.

Pain, sorrow, tragedy... madness.

Even Sunny himself was affected by this insidious strangeness.

His single-minded obsession with learning how to weave, the sudden intensity of his affection toward Elyas, the subsequent crushing heartbreak over the young man's death, the unquenching hatred he had felt for the black steed… all of those things were not exactly out of his character, but slightly more consuming than they should have been.

Remembering the past few months, Sunny shivered.

'Wait… wait…'

Feverishly, he tried to recall all he knew about this Nightmare. The

seven knives, the seven immortals… a thousand years of solemn duty… the terrible torture one of the rulers of the Ivory City had been subjected to by his own brother… the destruction of the Sacred Grove… the Shadow Lord making a choice to take a coward's way out before, before…

Before what?

Suddenly, an expression of shocked understanding appeared on Sunny's face.

He looked at Noctis for a while, and then cautiously picked up the emerald amulet. A single word formed in his mind:

"Hope?"

The sorcerer smiled, then nodded and looked at the vast expanse of the shattered kingdom below them.

"...Indeed. Hope."

Noctis took a sip of wine, the smile disappearing from his face. A few moments later, he said indifferently:

"The Lord of Light bound Hope with seven brilliant shackles, and made those shackles eternal. That was us… me and the rest of the Chain Lords. He entrusted each of us with the fate of another, and a solemn duty to never let the Demon escape. And, for a few centuries, everything was fine…"

His face grew dark and cold. The sorcerer remained silent for a while, and then continued:

"But slowly, we grew tired. Doubt found its way into our hearts. Eternity… eternity is a heavy burden, Sunless. And under its weight, unnoticed, one of us grew twisted. So, another one made a choice to uproot the corruption… that was how the first of the Chain Lords died. Aidre, my dear friend… murdered by that wicked slayer, Solvane, her beautiful grove burned to the ground."

Noctis remained motionless, but the wooden mannequins surrounding them suddenly clenched their fists, their fingers

splintering from the immense pressure. Their crude faces did not move, but Sunny could feel an almost palpable feeling of fury radiating from their figures.

The sorcerer sighed.

"...And so, all of our fates were sealed. Yes, six shackles still remained. But Hope's prison wasn't perfect anymore. Her will, her insidious influence seeped out, little by little, infecting us all… slowly devouring the whole kingdom, every living being in it, from the smallest insect to the mightiest immortal, igniting our desires, twisting them, changing us into something different.

Something terrible, rampant, and vile."

He laughed.

"Oh! Of course, none of us noticed it for a long, long time. Hundreds of years, even. Maybe only Shadow… and by the time the rest of us understood, at least those who were still sane enough, it was already too late. The whole of the Kingdom of Hope had been driven mad by its former ruler. Had been turned into a vicious hell.

We were all taken by Hope."

Noctis smiled and sipped his wine, then chuckled.

"So, yeah, Sunless. All of us here are insane… I thought you would have known already, judging by the scars covering your body. The Warmongers are all insane, and so is their leader, Solvane. The citizens of the Ivory City are also mad, just as their two rulers are. The One in the North is perhaps the craziest of us all. Well… except for me, of course!

I am the maddest person in all of the Kingdom of Hope, I would have you know."

Sunny stared at the gleefully smiling sorcerer, suddenly overwhelmed by terror.

"That damned Seed… that damned Mordret! Curse the day he told me about how rare and precious it is!"

The sorcerer chuckled.

"Uh… well, I don't know who Mordret is, and what seed you are talking about. However, there is one thing I do know. Actually, it's a question. That question… it has been tormenting me for centuries, Sunless. Do you know what that question is? What was the seed of my personal madness?"

Sunny frowned, then slowly shook his head.

Noctis lingered for a few moments, then looked away and said with a wistful smile:

"That is a question Aidre asked me, a long time ago. You see… if the Lord of Light wanted the seven of us to keep Hope imprisoned, forever…"

His smile widened slightly, then suddenly dimmed.

"...Then why did he give each of us a key to her freedom?"

# Chapter-650: Drastic Measures

Sunny remained silent for as long as he could, until, finally, the Flaw forced him to give an answer.

He looked grimly at Noctis, and then said — or rather, thought — hoarsely:

"...Maybe he just wanted to see you suffer."

Noctis laughed brightly, then nodded.

"Oh, indeed! Maybe you are right. Gods can be very cruel, sometimes. After all, they are much more ancient and vast than kindness and compassion. Or, maybe, it is not really our lives that keep the Demon bound, but instead our will and desire to keep her imprisoned. Or maybe it is a test of our conviction… that is what the Sun Lord believes, at least.

Or maybe… maybe he actually hoped that we would free her. Who knows?"

He smiled, then sighed, and finally added:

"...If mortals like us could know the will of gods, then we'd be gods instead."

After that, a somber silence settled over the deck of the flying ship.

Sunny stared at the delicious food in front of him, realizing that he had lost all his appetite.

Hope… the Demon of Desire…

How terrifying she was.

Slowly, several things that had seemed random and meaningless fell

into place.

The jubilant crowd in the bloodsoaked Red Colosseum, the perverse conviction of beautiful Solvane, the harrowing torture of the Sun Prince, the madness that burned in the eyes of the black steed… all of it was the result of her harrowing power.

Hope held domain over desire, after all. And with that power, she had reached through the tiny cracks in her prison, and drove a whole realm utterly insane, turning it into a ghastly, hideous, demented hell. Every aspiration, every desire, every dream, every hope were twisted, set aflame, and turned into a weapon. An insidious, invisible weapon that struck at human hearts and minds from within.

No one was immune to her power. Neither mundane humans nor Awakened... not even Saints. Those who were close and those who were far, all fell victim to the daemon's curse.

And what was her own hope? What was the Demon of Desire yearning for?

Well, that was easy…

Hope wanted to be free.

…Just like Sunny wanted to be free, really.

She was driving her jailers mad, so that they would destroy each other. And from the looks of it, her curse was working all too well. Solvane was seeking out death, the two Transcendents of the Ivory City seemed to be on the verge of fratricide, and Noctis was planning to kill them all.

The One in the North… Sunny didn't know about the last Chain Lord, but from the little bits of what the sorcerer had said, she was not in her right mind, either.

Suddenly, he remembered the sight of the time running in reverse that he had witnessed at the very start of the Nightmare. The Ivory Tower had descended from the sky, and the burned wasteland around it had turned into a beautiful white city.

…Which meant that one day, perhaps soon, the Ivory City would be burned to the ground, and Hope's prison would then break off its seven chains and rise above the Chained Isles.

And then, the Crushing would be created, somehow.

A cold, dire feeling grasped his two hearts.

'Oh, no…'

Suddenly, Sunny came to a harrowing realization. His eyes widened, and he glanced at Noctis with fear.

This… this was the conflict they — he, Cassie, Effie, Kai, and Mordret — had to resolve to conquer the Nightmare. They had to either help this mad sorcerer free the terrifying Demon, or make sure that she would never escape.

The five of them were pitted against the five immortal Saints.

A barely audible groan escaped from his lips.

'How is this possible… what happened to the Spell always being fair? How the hell can this be fair?!'

Another revelation suddenly appeared in his mind. Those words Aidre had said before accepting Solvane's challenge… the gratitude she expressed… had Solvane really eradicated the blessed of Heart God to punish Aidre for her heresy?

Or had the beautiful warrior known all along what would happen if one of the Chain Lords was killed, and doomed all of the remaining immortals, including herself, to a fate worse than death — to a slow and inevitable descent into madness, followed by eventual destruction? All in order to free Hope from her prison, and herself from eternal life?

If so, she had indeed been the bravest of them all… and also the most hateful.

...Or admirable, depending on how one looked at it.

But that didn't really matter.

Sunny grasped the emerald amulet and channeled a somber thought, which came out in a hoarse voice.

There was one thing that he still couldn't understand.

"The obsidian knife that I carry… the one that you lost… how were you going to kill the other Chain Lords without it, and without the knowledge about the glass knife that I received from the black steed?"

Noctis looked at him for a bit, then smiled darkly.

"Ah, that… the drastic thing I was about to do? Well… it was a really terrible choice. I am very glad that fate sent you to me when it did, Sunless!"

He chuckled.

"You see, Sunless… desire is a very powerful thing. In fact, it is perhaps the most powerful thing in the world. It is what the gods were born from, after all, in the endless, everchanging void of chaos. But there is one force more terrifying than desire. And that force is fate."

The sorcerer looked away with a distant expression.

"Even gods are afraid of fate, Sunless. So… I was going to make a deal with a certain creature. A harrowing, evil, and insidious monster. The vile Demon known as Weaver, who holds domain over fate. These knives can kill us because they hold the strings of our fates… so, if anyone can find a way to end our lives without the knives, it would be Weaver."

As Noctis mentioned Weaver's name, he shuddered, then forced out a pale smile.

"But… the Demon of Fate would have asked a terrible price of me, I'm sure. So, it is very fortunate that you came along! Just imagine… that fiend would have made me into something ugly, or even worse, poorly dressed. The horror!"

Noctis laughed and gave one of the Sailor Dolls a command to bring another amphora of wine.

He either didn't notice or pretended to overlook the sudden tension that appeared in Sunny's eyes.

'So… Noctis wanted to make a deal with Weaver to free Hope… and then, I suddenly appeared?'

A cold shiver suddenly ran down his spine.

'What, exactly, does that mean?'

# Chapter-651: Invisible Tethers

Some time later, Sunny was back in his luxurious cabin, sitting on the soft bed and staring at the wall with a distant look on his bestial face.

After the dinner conversation that was rife with revelations, each more terrible than the other, he had told Noctis that he needed time to think before giving an answer. Despite the fact that Sunny now held the keys to possessing two of Sun God's knives, the sorcerer had not pressed him at all and agreed to wait with his usual carefree attitude.

If there was one redeeming quality about the immortals, it was that they could be very patient.

Now, the flying ship was moving, sailing across the skies on its way back to the Sanctuary of Noctis. They would be arriving in a day or two… by then, Sunny needed to know what he wanted to do, and how.

He had to find the others, and conquer this cursed Nightmare, somehow.

Help Noctis free Hope, or make sure that she stays imprisoned forever?

A pale smile appeared on his face.

Hope… how funny it was, to learn that this whole realm had been driven mad by the subtle, irresistible, inescapable manipulation of the great and terrible Demon of Desire. Everyone here was subjugated by her wondrous, harrowing powers. Including himself.

Back in the Dark City, at his lowest point, Sunny had given up all hope of ever returning to the real world. In fact, he had convinced himself that hope was the deadliest, most vile of poisons.

It was only after he had clawed his way back from the brink of madness and out of the Forgotten Shore, returning alive to the waking world, that he understood the erroneous and destructive harmfulness of that misguided belief.

Sunny had built a modest life for himself and found out that there were people who genuinely cared about him... and even more importantly, that there were people whom he cared about himself. That hope was not something to fear, but instead something to draw power from. Something so vital that without it, there was no way to survive, and no real point, either.

…So, learning that his mind was now literally being poisoned by Hope was full of incredible, incredibly bitter irony.

'How fitting…'

He sighed, and then stared at his four calloused hands.

The obsidian knife, the ivory knife… the glass knife, the wooden knife… and one more, which he knew nothing about. Could they really collect them all? Noctis, Solvane, the Sun Twins, the One in the North… could they really survive them all?

Whether he liked it or not, there was only one inevitable way to find out.

First things first… he was going to have to make his way to the Iron Hand island to see if the others had left clues to their whereabouts. Luckily, it was not that far from the Sanctuary. Noctis had said that Sunny's new heart needed a week or two to settle — whatever that meant — so he wouldn't be able to go right away. But the goal was already in sight.

After the cohort was reunited, they would have to make a decision about which side to support.

The others… Sunny wondered where they were, and how they were doing. Were they even alive? Had their journey in the Nightmare been as harrowing as his?

Recalling his own struggles, he shivered.

The nightmares… most of them had faded from his memory, their details dissipating until all that was left was one dark, chaotic mess of vague images, pressing weight, and sharp emotions. But some were still clear and vivid in all their terrible splendor, especially the first ones he had lived through.

He remembered it all… being a father who watched the flames consume his son, wife, and unborn child… an old man who dragged his weak body across scorching ash as his whole world burned around him… an immortal warrior being endlessly tortured by his own brother… and a cunning shadow who had grown too tired and indifferent to care about life.

That last one was, perhaps, the most damning. Not because it was especially torturous — on the contrary, the Shadow Lord had been content and at peace in his last moments — but because it showed Sunny the pain and sorrow of those whom the heartless immortal had left behind.

That understanding was only made worse by witnessing how the Shadow's beloved steed had ended up… lonesome, broken, and consumed by madness, guarding the empty castle that his master would never return to until his last pitiful breath.

But that was the nature of life. As one went through it, they collected strings and tethers that connected them to others. Everyone's fates were intertwined, and everyone was tied down and bound by those numerous connections, some of them fleeting, some deep and precious. Sunny, too, was not untethered anymore.

Which meant that, should he die or be destroyed, his would not be the only fate that was broken and damaged. Everyone connected to him would suffer, too. And that… that, in a way, made him responsible not only for himself, but also for those whose lives he had made different. The weight of that unfamiliar responsibility pressed heavily on his shoulders.

Sunny sighed.

Was there… was there really such a thing as freedom? And if there was… would anyone really want to possess it?

He closed his eyes for a moment, overwhelmed by all these daunting thoughts. Even though he had forgotten most of the nightmares, they still changed him. He felt… older, somehow, and — hopefully — wiser. More mature and tempered… but also more fragile.

He spent some time in silence, listening to the hull of the flying ship creaking gently around him and his two hearts beating steadily in his chest.

Then, Sunny breathed out and opened his eyes.

There was not much time to spend on pondering and self-reflection. A Nightmare was a place for action, not philosophy.

The corner of his mouth curved upward.

'Fine… let's get ready to act, then. First, I should probably — finally! — check on all those rewards I received, thanks to that damned horse!"

And there were plenty…

# Chapter-652: Plentiful Gains

Sunny got comfortable on his criminally soft bed, picked up a few succulent grapes from the tray placed on an intricate table near it, threw one in his mouth… and finally summoned the runes.

'Let's see…'

The first thing he glanced at was the shadow fragments counter. He vaguely remembered receiving what felt like much more than six after slaying the black steed, who had been an Awakened Terror. So, Sunny was hopeful to see a pleasant number…

However, when he did see it, he almost choked on the grape juice to death.

'What… what the Spell?! What?!'

He even rubbed his eyes, thinking that he was seeing things, but no. The counter was the same.

Shadow Fragments: [2823/3000].

Sunny stared at it in disbelief.

'Six hundred… I received almost six hundred fragments for killing that damned horse?'

Absentmindedly, he threw another grape into his mouth, and proceeded to almost bite off one of his fingers from the sheer disorientation of it all.

'How is this even possible?!'

He thought about it for a bit, stunned, and then tilted his head a little.

'Could it be…'

One of the advantages, but also inherent drawbacks of Sunny's Aspect was that it operated through shadow fragments instead of the usual soul ones. So, while Sunny didn't need to collect and absorb shards to grow stronger, he also could not use the shards of creatures that he had not personally slain for that purpose.

The other detail was that, unlike all human Awakened, he did not receive a portion of all the accumulated soul fragments after killing others of his own kind, and instead received just one or two, depending on their Rank.

Was that, perhaps, because the Spell — or rather, the world itself — did not consider him a human? He was a divine shadow, after all, and shadows recognized him as one of their own. So… would it be safe to say… that in this context, his own kind were actually not humans, but shadows instead?

The black steed had been a Shadow created by one of the Chain Lords. An Awakened Terror possessing six cores, and with a thousand years of battles and bloodshed behind his shoulders to fill them to the brim with shadow fragments.

…Did Sunny receive a portion of the fragments accumulated by the tenebrous courser throughout his long and grim life, as a normal Awakened would after slaying another human?

The math certainly supported that theory.

Sunny's eyes ignited.

'That… that is it!'

Not only was he correct… he might have just stumbled on one of the most crucial secrets about his own Aspect, power, and future.

Ever since finding out that his Aspect allowed him to form and possess multiple cores, Sunny had been wary of the eventual toll hunting down enough Nightmare Creatures to create a new one would exert. As a Sleeper, or even an Awakened, he was too small and vulnerable. Any powerful abomination would have been able to

snuff him out of existence with no more than a glance.

The higher he climbed on the path of Ascension, the less of such existences there would be, and thus, the higher his chances of survival were going to become. However, that also meant that there would be fewer creatures he would be able to hunt down to collect shadow fragments, since slaying those lower than him in Rank did not give him any at all.

But… now that he knew how much he could gain from destroying true shadow creatures… perhaps, there was still a way for him to grow stronger rapidly even after becoming a Master.

In any case, his progress was already staggering. First, the thousand fragments he had earned in the bloodsoaked arena of the Red Colosseum, and now these hundreds he gained by slaying the nightmare steed.

Neither of these feats had been easy… in fact, both rewards had cost him an unimaginable amount of pain, torment, and damage both mental and physical… but the result almost made it seem as if it had all been worth it.

…Almost.

At the start of the Nightmare, the idea of gaining enough fragments to create a fourth core had seemed so distant and unreachable. But now, just a few months later, Sunny was already near the finish line. This fact was both exciting and incredible… even if its splendor was somewhat overshadowed by all the hideous scars he had received along the way.

'...No. No, it is still amazing. I survived, did I not?'

Both elated and reminded of the horrors he had been subjected to in the Nightmare, Sunny stared at the unbelievable number for some time, then shifted his gaze elsewhere.

The second reward he had received was also very welcomed, be it strangely unexpected. In fact, Sunny stumbled upon it almost by accident while seeking the runes describing his Shadows. Before that,

he had noticed that the runes of the Mantle of the Underworld seemed to shimmer a bit differently.

Confused, he concentrated on them and shifted his gaze to the last string describing the enchantments of the onyx armor… the counter of victories tied to the [Prince of the Underworld] enchantment.

Now, it read:

Vanquished Foes: [3291/6000].

He blinked.

'Huh…'

Somehow… sometime… he had managed to raise the counter by almost a thousand victories. He knew that the Nightmare Creatures and humans he had killed in the Red Colosseum had not counted toward the requirements of the strange enchantment for a simple reason — he had not been wearing the Mantle of the Underworld while fighting them.

So where had the thousand vanquished foes come from?

Sunny frowned.

'Come to think of it… I was wearing the armor while sleeping in the boundary fortress. Did it actually accept every battle I won in the nightmares as a true victory?'

That would be very strange, since the enemies he had defeated in the neverending nightmares had been just phantasms summoned by the black steed, and not in any way real. However… that would also make sense. After all, the Mantle did not care about him actually killing the enemies.

All it cared about was that he had overpowered and defeated the opponent… if so, did it really matter if the opponent was real or not?

The duelists of the Dreamscape had been considered sufficiently real, so why would the creatures populating the nightmares be different?

'A thousand souls… had I really killed that many?'

Suddenly, Sunny felt cold and somber.

How many nightmares, exactly, had he lived through during those several terrible hours?

Full of dark wonder, he shook his head and looked away from the runes describing the onyx armor. He was already halfway to satiating its mysterious enchantment… which was already good enough.

Finally, Sunny looked at the cluster that interested him the most.

…His Shadows.

A few runes shimmered beautifully in the darkness.

They read:

Shadows: [Marble Saint], [Soul Serpent]...

And then, a new one:

[Nightmare].

# Chapter-653: Cute Little Snake

Sunny remained motionless for a while, a pale smile appearing on his face. Beyond the window of his cabin, the sky was slowly turning black, the stars shining on its velvet surface as they welcomed the arrival of the newborn moon.

'Nightmare… so that is your name.'

What better name could there be for a Shadow that moved through human dreams, turning them into visions of horror?

He hesitated for a few moments, then looked away, turning to a different string of runes first.

There was another Shadow of his that had changed. The Soul Serpent... every time Sunny moved up a Class, so did the Serpent. And every time Sunny mastered a new step of Shadow Dance, the Serpent ascended to a new Rank.

...At least, that was how things were supposed to go.

Shadow: [Soul Serpent].

Shadow Rank: Ascended.

Shadow Class: Demon.

Shadow Attributes: [Shadow Guide], [Soul Weapon], [Soul Beast].

Sunny sighed.

'Ascended...'

Now that he had mastered the third step of the Shadow Dance, the Serpent had, indeed, evolved as well. The tenebrous creature was now an Ascended Demon, just like Saint. Both of them had left Sunny

in the dust.

While it hurt his pride a little that his Shadows were more powerful than him… not to mention way cooler, according to some tasteless brats… having two creatures of such formidable might under his command was going to be of tremendous help, without a doubt. Especially considering the caliber of enemies he would most likely have to face in this trial.

He glanced down, at the intricate tattoo coiling around his arms and torso. It seemed larger. Sunny could already feel the rush of the essence through his body, its rate of expenditure and speed of replenishment increased even further.

Not only was the Serpent going to be much more powerful in its Soul Beast form, but also, from now on, any Soul Weapon Sunny would want to use would be of the Ascended Rank, as well.

Basically, he now had a vast arsenal of Ascended armaments to choose from.

'...Well, isn't that neat?'

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then continued to read the runes. The Serpent was not supposed to gain any new Abilities from rising to a new Rank, just like Saint had not. However, that Legacy Shadow of his was a bit strange… it had come into possession of the [Soul Beast] Attribute and the [Soul Reaver] Ability the last time he mastered a step of the Aspect Legacy, after all.

Who knew, maybe this time would be the same?

And just as Sunny hoped, there was a new set of runes shining in the darkness.

Shadow Abilities: [Serpentine Steel], [Soul Reaver], [Grace of Shadows].

He frowned.

'Huh? Grace of Shadows?'

Sunny concentrated on the new Ability, and read:

Ability Description: [The master of the Soul Serpent can grace another with the trust and companionship of their Shadow Guide. One should be careful whom they bestow with their grace; entrusting others with the loyalty of Shadows is the same as sharing one's soul, and thus should not be offered lightly.]

He tilted his head.

'Uh… what?'

So, basically, this Ability allowed Sunny to transfer the ownership of the Soul Serpent to someone else, as if the Shadow was just an Echo. No, not quite… Echoes could be transferred only to other Awakened, while the Grace of Shadows could be bestowed upon anyone with a shadow, presumably.

If Sunny wanted to, he could gift the Soul Serpent to a random Nightmare Creature. Like the Mordant Mimic, for example. That would have been funny…

'What? No! No, it wouldn't have!'

Why would he give away his precious Serpent? Especially considering that the description hinted that doing so would leave him vulnerable. What nonsense was this?

Sunny grimaced. Well, not every Ability could be a winner. This one was rather useless… he could imagine a situation where lending the Soul Serpent to one of the cohort members would be beneficial, but just barely. It would be easier to just command the creature himself.

With a sigh, he commanded the Serpent to slither off of his skin and present itself for inspection.

A few moments later, Sunny flinched back.

'What?! Where… where did my cute little snake go?!'

The Shadow had changed a lot, indeed. Before, the Soul Serpent had not really been a "cute little snake", but its size was at least not too

terrible… no more than six meters in length, at best. But now, a stygian creature of at least twice that size sprawled through the cabin, its mighty body covered in adamantine jet-black scales and as thick as a tree trunk.

Its terrifying maw was wide enough to swallow Sunny whole… well, at least his real, human body… and its triangular head hovered near the ceiling, two tenebrous eyes looking at him from above.

The Soul Serpent was so large that it barely fit into the confines of the cabin, suddenly making it look small and fragile.

Sunny gulped.

'What… what a good boy… you are. Nice snake! Uh, you... you can return now, buddy.'

The Shadow stared at him for a few more seconds, then hissed deeply and moved, its scales rustling on the floorboards. Soon, it turned back into an intricate, beautiful tattoo.

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, shaken, and then slowly grinned.

'Good... perfect! If even I am afraid of that thing… imagine how my enemies will feel…'

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Some time later, Sunny commanded the Serpent to turn itself into the black odachi, and sat quietly for a while, glancing at its somber steel. Every centimeter of this weapon was familiar to him… and yet, it felt different. The great blade felt sharper, stronger, far more devastating.

This was a weapon one could cut a mountain with.

He willed the Soul Weapon to shift into a spear, then a tang dao, then a tachi, and finally a battle axe. All of them felt the same — deadly and brimming with dark power. Only the axe seemed a little bit off.

The Serpent could take any form, but was limited by Sunny's knowledge. The better he knew a weapon, the better he could

imagine it, to the smallest of details… the greater the result would be. And so, while he could command it to assume any shape, those that he had experience with would produce the best result.

He feasted his eyes on the somber steel for a bit, and then put the Shadow aside.

It was time to check on the rest of his rewards.

Since Sunny's mind had been preoccupied with the Soul Serpent and his Aspect Legacy for the last few minutes, he decided to continue with that.

Summoning the runes one more time, he looked to the bottom of the shimmering field of symbols and concentrated on a certain string.

Aspect Legacy: [Shadow Dance].

Shadow Dance Mastery Level: [3/7].

First Relic: Claimed.

Second Relic: Claimed.

Third Relic: [Claim]

Sunny hesitated for a long time, his face turning grim.

What the hell was he going to do if the third Relic turned out to be another drop of ichor? Waste it again?

'Curses...'

Finally, he inhaled deeply and thought:

'Claim!'

For a moment, nothing happened. And then, the Spell whispered into his ear:

[You have claimed an Aspect Legacy Relic.]

[...You have received a Memory.]

Sunny gritted his teeth and looked up, at the list of his Memories. Then, a relieved sigh escaped from his lips.

It was not a drop of Shadow God's blood.

Instead, an unfamiliar combination of runes appeared at the end of the list. It read:

Memory: [Shadow Lantern].

# Chapter-654: Shadow Lantern

Sunny read the runes with curiosity:

Memory: [Shadow Lantern].

Memory Rank: Divine.

…He fell from the bed.

'What?!'

Another… another Divine Memory?

Feeling cold sweat rolling down his face, Sunny wiped it off with a trembling hand and slowly clenched his fists.

'Should... should be interesting…'

He looked back to the runes, trying to calm his wildly beating hearts.

Just what kind of a Relic had he received?

Sunny got ahold of himself and continued to read the description:

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Tool.

'A tool… makes sense. It is a lantern, after all. But what does it do? Lanterns are supposed to produce light and illuminate things. That's not exactly what shadows are known for, is it?'

With a concerned frown, he looked back at the runes.

Memory Description:

["Death is just the shadow of life," said the Goddess of Life. "And peace is just the failure of war. Have you ever been something that had not been stolen, made empty, and vile? Have you ever done something that was not futile and hollow? Can you even exist without being cast by another? Look at how weak you are, how small you are.

Am I supposed to be frightened of a small shadow?"

Made pale and feeble by the radiance of day, Shadow laughed and rose from the ground. As he did, his figure swallowed the land, devoured the heavens, and blotted out the light of the sun. Soon, there was nothing left around them but darkness. And from that darkness, a hiss came, making Life tremble:

"Life is just the prelude to death, and war is just the key to open its gates. Everything you cherish, everything you nurture, everything that starts with you will one day be mine, be welcomed by me, swallowed by me, and find peace within me. This is the mercy of Shadow. Hollow… futile... you might have come first, my sister, but when your cruelty ends… I will be all that remains…"]

Sunny shivered.

'D—damn… was Shadow God always that creepy?'

Due to his closeness and affinity to shadows, he had never thought about the God of Shadows as terrifying. After all, even other gods had not held Shadow in high regard, at least from what Sunny knew. His temples had been burned and destroyed, his followers turned into slaves… even his aspects and attributes seemed to pale in comparison to others.

God of peace, death, solace, and mysteries… that sounded humble and rather inconspicuous when compared to something like Goddess of the Black Skies, the god of storms, depths, of the oceans, of darkness, stars, travel, guidance, and disaster.

…But things that preferred to remain unseen and unheard were often the most dangerous, weren't they?

Sort of like Sunny himself.

He shook his head, pondered about the description for a bit, and then smiled crookedly.

'I guess War God did not like Shadow God at all… well, that's not surprising. In many ways, they are the opposite of each other. No wonder every time I meet someone from the War camp, I end up either having my heart torn out or, even worse, lured into a Nightmare so cursed that all other Nightmares ought to give it face.'

He sighed, then continued reading the runes:

Memory Enchantments: [Gates of Shadow].

Enchantment Description: [This lantern devours light and can contain, and then release, an infinite amount of shadows.]

Sunny blinked.

'Huh?'

The enchantment didn't seem like much, for a Divine Relic… that was unless one really thought about the meaning behind those words.

Infinite…

He suspected that in this case, the word was used to describe an actual infinity instead of a fake one, like with the Endless Spring. If that was the truth… yes, an object that could contain infinity was indeed worthy of being divine. It simply broke all the laws of reason.

However, how did it help Sunny?

He frowned, a little bit disappointed.

'Why couldn't it be a nasty all-destroying sword, instead?'

He summoned the Memory and saw a small lantern weave itself from darkness in his hand. The thing was not too big, about the size of his palm, and made out of black… something. It didn't feel or look like any material he had ever seen, resembling stone more than anything.

The frame of the lantern was intricately engraved, making it seem and feel like the scales of a serpent, and its walls were made out of glossy black morion. There was a ring of dark metal on its top, with a short chain attached to it. It could be held in a hand or fastened to one's belt, if need be.

As soon as the lantern appeared, the darkness of the night that surrounded Sunny instantly became deeper and colder, oppressive, and impenetrable. Any hint of starlight was devoured, turning the interior of the cabin completely black. He, of course, could still see through that darkness, but anyone else would probably have a lot of trouble.

Suddenly full of a pleasant feeling of comfort, Sunny turned the beautiful lantern around and noticed a small door on one of its walls. He hesitated, then commanded the door to open.

It instantly slid forward, revealing a square of utter nothingness behind. A moment later, Sunny felt his hair stand on end, and his hearts stagger in his chest. He was suddenly cold, overwhelmed by unease, and… terrified. Like an animal facing something so much larger than itself that the difference in size could simply not be comprehended.

He slowly exhaled, the breath escaping his mouth as chilling mist.

'...I guess that is how infinity feels.'

The lantern was empty, so he couldn't command any shadows to escape it. So, instead, he glanced at the happy shadow and raised an eyebrow.

'Wanna come inside?'

The shadow looked at him with fear, then energetically shook its head. Sunny rolled his eyes, then turned to the creepy one.

'What about you?'

The creepy guy stared at him for a bit, then shrugged indifferently… and disappeared into the small door, as if he had never been there.

Sunny could still vaguely feel their connection, but not in the way that he was used to. He couldn't see, hear, or sense what the shadow was seeing, hearing, and sensing. All he knew was that it still existed, somewhere else, in a terrible vast, dark, and cold place.

His face grew dim, and he commanded the creepy shadow to return.

The weird guy flowed out of the lantern, shrugged again, and planted himself back on the floor.

…Then, when it thought that no one was watching, the shadow shuddered and hugged itself for a moment.

'What a strange Memory…'

What was the use of it?

Sunny summoned Saint and tried to repeat the experiment, but to no avail. The tenebrous knight remained motionless when he told her to enter the beautiful black lantern, not showing any signs of knowing how to abide by the order.

'I guess it doesn't work with Shadows…'

He frowned, then lowered the lantern to the ground and brought it closer to wild shadows hiding in the corners of the cabin. Then, feeling extremely stupid, Sunny thought aloud:

'Uh… do you want to come inside?'

The shadows moved slightly, flowing toward the lantern, and then swiftly slid through the black door.

A hint of a smile appeared on Sunny's bestial face.

'Ah… now we're talking. That… that I can work with…'

Satisfied, he closed the door of the lantern, and then dismissed it.

Sunny was still a little bit sad that the Relic had not turned out to be a destructive weapon, but his disappointment waned. While not as immediately useful, the lantern would allow him to carry friendly

shadows… an infinite amount of them, no less… with him at all times.

That would counteract the main weakness of his Aspect — the fact that most of his Abilities only worked within the veil of darkness — to a large degree.

And, without a doubt, as his powers grew and the number of his Abilities increased, having a swarm of deep shadows at hand would only grow more useful.

Plus, he had a feeling that he had not discovered all the secrets of the Shadow Lantern yet...

But now it was time to study his last, and most important reward.

It was time to meet an old friend.

The Shadow of the black steed whose name was Nightmare…

# Chapter-655: Nightmare

Sunny sighed, then closed his eyes and dove into the Soul Sea.

The tranquil, lightless expanse of his soul was the same as ever. The black water was still and silent, reflecting the three dark suns looming in a perfectly even triangle above. Only the rows of motionless shadows were different from how they had been before, crowded with countless victims of the Red Colosseum.

Despite the fact that Sunny's body was now very different, his soul remained the same.

He walked to stand between the three Shadow Cores, and called upon Nightmare.

A beautiful black steed walked out of a whirlwind of dark flames in front of him and stopped, its adamantine hooves sending ripples through the silent waters. The Shadow was just as he remembered it — tall and graceful, with a lustrous jet-black coat and lean muscles rolling under the skin. Its mane was long and luscious, and its tenebrous eyes glowed with fearsome crimson flames.

The courser had two long horns and a mouth full of sharp fangs that resembled that of a wolf. The horns, the fangs, and the hooves were all forged out of a strange black metal that seemed to be able to compete with the impenetrable onyx of the Mantle of the Underworld. Sunny shuddered, remembering the pain and shock of being struck and bitten by them.

As soon as Nightmare appeared, he felt a whispering fear appear in his mind. Strangely tense, Sunny took a step forward and raised one of his hands, patting the stallion on the muzzle.

"Hey there. We... we meet again, old friend…"

Nightmare was, indeed, an old friend of his… at least of the part of him that had relived the final day of the Shadow Lord's life and their last exhilarating ride together. But just like Sunny was a different person now, this beautiful Shadow was, too. The madness was gone from the stallion's crimson eyes, and so was the burden of hundreds of years of sorrow and loneliness.

It was as though the black steed was now reborn, still remaining the same being, but also somehow renewed by the purifying darkness of death.

As Sunny patted his muzzle, Nightmare pressed it against the calloused hand and looked at his master with a pale, distant hint of recognition. The crimson glow of his eyes ignited with a new intensity, and the black steed snorted, its voice full of quiet affection.

Satisfied, Sunny summoned the runes into existence and glanced at them, curious to see what, exactly, his new Shadow was capable of.

He read:

Shadow: [Nightmare].

Shadow Rank: Awakened.

Shadow Class: Terror.

Shadow Description: [This beautiful steed was tamed by the treacherous Lost From Light in the depths of a harrowing dream. The two Shadows battled across countless nightmares, shattering them all apart; neither was willing to give up, so in the end, the nightmares did.]

Sunny sighed.

'Again with that treacherous nonsense. At least the Spell did not openly mock me, this time.'

He still remembered the biting description of Shadow Dance...

Shaking his head dejectedly, Sunny rubbed the terrible scar on his neck and turned his attention back to the runes.

Shadow Attributes: [Swift], [Dark Destrier], [Dreadlord], [Dreamwalker].

[Swift] Attribute Description: "This Shadow is especially swift and enduring."

[Dark Destrier] Attribute Description: "This dark horse was meant to be a shadow warrior's steed, and accompany its rider into battle. It is fierce, loyal, and knows no fear. Its speed, strength, and resilience grow when surrounded by darkness and shadows."

[Dreadlord] Attribute Description: "This Shadow's might grows the more he is feared."

[Dreamwalker] Attribute Description: "This Shadow can travel through dreams."

Sunny studied the black courser with a thoughtful expression.

'Huh…'

So, Nightmare was incredibly swift and enduring. He was also a war horse, bred to ride into battle without hesitation or fear. What's more, he had two passive Attributes that both increased his speed, strength, and resilience — one when the destrier and his rider were surrounded by shadows, the other when the destrier inspired terror in the hearts of their enemies.

That was… an insidious and frightening combination. Especially because one effect fed into the other, creating a vicious cycle. Perhaps Sunny had only survived the battle with the Terror due to the fact that, at some point, his tortured mind had become too broken to experience fear.

An Awakened Terror was already an immensely powerful creature, and with two passive augmentations added into the mix... he shivered.

'Scary...'

And then there was the last Attribute, [Dreamwalker]. That one, Sunny didn't even know what to think about.

'We'll see about invading people's dreams later… wouldn't it be fun, to jump into Mordret's mind one day and give him a taste of his own medicine?'

With a dark grin, Sunny slowly exhaled and continued to read the runes. Attributes were, without a doubt, very important… especially excellent ones like what Nightmare possessed. But it was the Abilities that mattered the most…

Shadow Abilities: [Flowing Shadow], [Mantle of Fear], [Nightmare], [Dream Curse].

[Flowing Shadow] Ability Description: "This steed can dive into shadows and move through them with incredible speed."

Sunny smiled.

'Ah… so, basically, it is like Shadow Step without the teleportation part. Still very useful, and works perfectly with my own Ability.'

He turned back to the runes, his mood elevated:

[Mantle of Fear] Ability Description: "This Shadow is capable of delivering a continuous mind attack around it that infects its foes with crippling fear."

Sunny couldn't help but whistle.

'That's… that is just... damn!'

The ability to radiate an aura of terror was already incredible enough. It could debilitate weaker enemies completely, and even if more powerful creatures were able to resist some of the effect, a seed of dread was still going to be planted into their minds. And that… that was directly tied to the [Dreadlord] Attribute of Nightmare, which made him stronger the more he was feared!

'Scary… so scary…'

It was a good thing that Sunny had been wearing the Mantle of Underworld when he met the black steed. The onyx armor gifted him with a good amount of protection against mind attacks, after all.

With his smile growing both wider and a bit pale, he moved to the next Ability.

[Nightmare] Ability Description: "This Shadow can create and subjugate nightmares. The more nightmares serve it, the more powerful it grows, both inside and outside dreams."

Dormant Nightmares: [0].

Sunny stared at the runes for a while, trying to make sense of them.

'Huh…'

So… Nightmare's tyrant ability, the one that allowed him to create minions, was meant to subjugate real nightmares — not any kind of beings made of flesh and bone, but actual dreams. And the more of them served him, the more powerful he grew.

These nightmares, it seemed, possessed a Rank of their own, which was currently Dormant — one lower than the black steed's own. Additionally, there were currently zero of them under his authority. But how could one create a nightmare? Or subjugate it? Sunny had no idea.

What he did understand, though, was why his own journey through the countless nightmares had ended when it did. It seemed that each of the harrowing dreams Sunny experienced had been either collected or made by the original Nightmare throughout the centuries, and once all of them were destroyed, he broke free of the black steed's hold.

'...Interesting.'

Sunny was going to have to figure out how to get his Shadow some minions of its own… something told him that the process was going to be neither straightforward nor easy.

With a sigh, he glanced at the last Ability that Nightmare possessed.

This one was called [Dream Curse], but looked different from all the rest. The runes constituting the string were dull and lifeless, as though the Ability was not accessible. And indeed, when he tried to

concentrate on it, a few new runes appeared:

Nightmares required: [0/1000].

Sunny grimaced.

'Damnation. I guess being a true Terror is not that simple…'

Still, his new Shadow was a fearsome one. Not only was it a swift and mighty steed, it was also a force on the battlefield in its own right, one that could instill fear in the hearts of his enemies, and then feed on it to grow stronger. More than that, it was a true shadow creature, which meant that its Attributes and Abilities went perfectly with his own.

Sunny had experienced the terrifying fury of the black courser himself, so he felt giddy knowing that this fearsome creature was going to be fighting on his side from now on. Gods knew he was going to need as many powerful allies as he could find.

His smile dimmed a little.

There was one very obvious flaw about Nightmare. It wasn't the black steed's fault, of course, but saddened Sunny nevertheless. He let out a deep sigh.

'Uh… yeah. If only you came with a saddle…'

How was he supposed to ride this scary horse without a saddle?! What nonsensical injustice was this?!

Not wishing to disparage the noble steed, Sunny hid his dismay, patted Nightmare on the back, and grinned.

"Good horse, Nightmare! Don't you worry… you and I are going to terrorize so many humans, Nightmare Creatures, and vile immortals that you'll collect some nasty dreams in no time. They will all be scared of us, you'll see! The only thing scarier than a treacherous shadow is a treacherous shadow atop a magnificent shadow horse, after all. I think that's how the saying goes. Or not?

In any case, you and I will do great — and terrible — things together!

If there is no such saying yet, there will be soon."

With a satisfied grin, Sunny dismissed the black courser, then left the Soul Sea and lay down on his bed, enjoying its immaculate softness.

Tiredly closing his eyes, he thought:

'I really, really deserve some rest…'

And as the flying ship of a mad sorcerer sailed across the sky, he fell peacefully asleep.

# Chapter-656: Gardens of the Moon

By the time Sunny woke up, the ship was already approaching the Sanctuary. Looking out of the window, he saw a familiar island below them… in his time, it was occupied by a fearsome Corrupted abomination. He wondered if it was still — or rather, already — nesting there.

In any case, from here, the Sanctuary was just a couple of chains away.

With a sigh, Sunny dressed himself and left the cabin, heading for the upper deck. Once outside, he saw Sailor Dolls moving around with graceful precision, hoisting sails and performing other tasks. Noctis was standing at the helm, wearing a completely new extravagant robe and whistling a light-hearted melody. Noticing Sunny, the sorcerer smiled.

"Ah, Sunless! How fortunate it is that you are awake. We are almost home."

He glanced forward and waved a hand, accidentally sending the ship into a lateral spin. The wooden mannequins somehow remained attached to the deck, but Sunny had to grab a handrail to not be thrown overboard. He gave the immortal Transcendent a resentful look.

Noctis smiled sheepishly.

"Oh… uh… sorry about that."

Shaking his head, Sunny ascended the stairs and joined the sorcerer at the bridge, which was situated at the stern of the enchanted vessel.

From there, he observed the landscape of the Kingdom of Hope in silence, until a familiar silhouette of a vast ring of menhirs standing atop a small island appeared in sight, surrounded by a white cloud of water vapor that came from several beautiful waterfalls.

The Sanctuary… it was nice to see it again. In this harrowing Nightmare, it almost felt like home.

Noctis grinned.

"That is it! The Sanctuary of Noctis, my beautiful lair. Isn't it pretty?"

Sunny hesitated, then took the emerald amulet out of the folds of his black garment and thought:

"...I guess. But isn't it a bit presumptuous, to call it after yourself?"

The sorcerer laughed.

"Oh, no! You misunderstood. Initially, it was called the Temple of the Moon. I built it as a shrine to my great-grandmother. I was perfectly content living there alone, but as the Kingdom of Hope went from bad to worse, stragglers started coming to my lands in search of a safe shelter from all the madness. I didn't have the heart… or rather, didn't care that much… to turn them away.

So, they started calling it the Sanctuary of Noctis. Why, it's a very nice name, if you ask me!"

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, then said in a somber tone:

"...Who is your great-grandmother?"

Noctis turned to him and blinked a couple of times, an expression of surprise clearly written on his beautiful face.

"Well, who else? The Goddess of the Moon, of course!"

Sunny paled.

'...How does this even make sense?'

He opened his mouth to say something, then shut it and decided not to think about it too much. Noticing this reaction, Noctis shrugged with a confused expression.

"Whom did you think I inherited my unparalleled looks from? People as gorgeous as I don't grow on trees, you know! Well… usually. Unless it is a very special tree, I guess."

Sunny gritted his teeth and tried very hard not to think anything aloud.

Soon, the flying ship descended from the skies and hovered in the center of the ring of giant menhirs, the sacred tree that grew on its deck situated right above the one growing on a small island surrounded by the pool of clear water, an altar of pure white stone drowning in the shade of its wide branches.

Sunny saw dozens of people staring up with awed expressions, and involuntarily searched for familiar faces.

It was futile, of course. Even if others were somehow here, they were going to look different from their real selves, after all.

Noctis grinned.

"Welcome to the Sanctuary! You'll like it here, for sure. Everyone here is very reasonable and nice. Just like me…"

Hearing that statement, Sunny shivered.

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Together, they left the flying vessel and walked through the garden, heading to the sorcerer's private quarters. Coincidentally, the residence was situated in the same place where the White Feather clan had established their stronghold in the future. Noctis built his home inside the ring of menhirs itself, however, instead of on top of it.

As they walked, Sunny studied the inhabitants of the Sanctuary of the past… most of them seemed like normal people. Some of them were mundane, and some were Awakened. They didn't seem to be in the

throes of madness. However, after the cruel lesson that had been taught to him in the Red Colosseum, he couldn't help but keep his guard up.

Sunny's gaze shifted from person to person, evaluating them for potential danger.

That young woman holding a young child by the hand seemed harmless, but why was the child so frightened? That man with a neatly trimmed beard seemed gentle and kind, but why was the hilt of his sword so polished and worn?

That beggar who sat lonesomely by himself, his body and face disfigured and wrapped in bandages like that of a leper, seemed too weak to pose a threat… but why was his gaze so sharp, his fingers so calloused?

And that old woman with a basket of fruit in her arms... why was she watching them so intently?

Sunny shook his head, then looked away.

'Being vigilant is good, but this is just the madness speaking. Wishing to be safe is also a desire… and so, it can also be twisted by Hope's influence. After the torments I experienced in the Red Colosseum and the nightmares, my mind is already unstable… I need to keep myself in check, or something terrible will happen...'

What dangers could there be here, in the stronghold of an immortal Saint? As long as Noctis himself did not decide to attack Sunny, he would be more or less safe.

And speaking of Noctis…

The sorcerer led him to a beautifully engraved wooden door, then opened it and led Sunny inside. His residence was just as one could expect… spacious, decorated with the most exquisite furnishings, and populated by all kinds of magical servants.

Staring at a mop that was dutifully washing the floors without anyone holding it, Sunny felt cold shivers running down his spine. He had a suspicion of how the Sailor Dolls were made…

'Don't tell me that the lunatic actually used someone's soul… to enchant this damned mop…'

Noctis grinned.

"I know what you are thinking."

Sunny flinched and stared at the immortal with tense apprehension.

The sorcerer nodded solemnly.

"...What is for breakfast, right? Oh, don't you worry, Sunless! I take breakfasts very seriously. Let us eat, then drink… then talk."

He sighed.

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions… I have a couple myself, to be honest..."

# Chapter-657: Chance of Victory

After a full and delightful meal, the two of them sat in silence for a while, enjoying their drinks. Noctis was consuming a truly unwise amount of wine with an absentminded smile on his face, while Sunny stuck to tea. The beautiful porcelain cup looked tiny and fragile in his massive clawed hand, sunlight reflecting from the amber surface of the fragrant drink.

In this rare moment of peace, he suddenly found himself overwhelmed by apathy and melancholy. Sunny was used to often feeling his heart beating with anger, fear, and resentment, but this strange lethargy was new and unwelcome. He didn't like it at all.

Searching for a way to entertain himself and chase it away, he suddenly glanced at the immortal sorcerer with a dangerous gleam in his eyes. Sunny lingered for a few moments, and then picked up the emerald amulet.

"Lord Noctis… you have been a very gracious host to me. You have given me shelter, showered me with gifts, and provided me with many delicious foods. Let me share the traditional food of my people with you, as well. That will make me feel better."

The immortal Transcendent raised an eyebrow and looked at him with doubt. Then, a curious grin appeared on his face.

"Oh! Exotic food… how wonderful. Do you need any ingredients to cook it?"

Sunny calmly shook his head, then summoned the Covetous Coffer. The toothy box weaved itself from sparks of light and appeared on the table. Then, it saw the sorcerer, trembled, and scurried over to hide behind one of Sunny's hands.

Noctis watched the Coffer appear with sincere amusement.

"Huh… that little creature of yours reminds me of someone. What a cutie!"

Sunny reached into the box and produced a tube of synthpaste, then handed it to the immortal with a polite smile. Noctis took the tube, stared at it in confusion for a while, then brought it closer to his face and sniffed it.

"Such a… peculiar… uh… container? It doesn't smell like anything."

Sunny nodded solemnly and made a twisting motion with his hand.

"You twist the cap off, pierce the membrane, and then squirt the contents into your mouth. Be warned, though… some people have said that its flavor is simply unmatched... unparalleled, even... and that there is no other food like this in the entire world. Many shed tears just from tasting it!"

The sorcerer blinked a couple of times after hearing words like "membrane" and "squirt", then twisted the cap off the tube and removed the foil membrane. Finally, he raised the tube with enthusiasm, opened his mouth wide, and sent a stream of viscous, colorless sludge into it.

Noctis closed his mouth, chewed a couple of times, then froze. Slowly, his face changed, becoming pale and almost panicked. He glanced at Sunny with wide eyes, shuddered, then slowly chewed some more, and swallowed with visible effort.

Sunny continued to stare at him.

"Remarkable, isn't it?"

The immortal Transcendent shivered, then forced out a weak smile.

"That, uh… is an unforgettable flavor, indeed. Truly… truly a dish worthy of being eaten by those following the God of Death! Thank you v—very much, Sunless. I've been… really enlightened…"

Sunny grinned.

"Don't be shy then. Eat some more!"

Noctis dropped the tube on the table and energetically shook his head.

"No, no. Sadly, I am very full. Thanks for the offer, though!"

He reached out with a trembling hand and grabbed his glass, then gulped down all of the wine in one go.

Sunny sipped his tea with a satisfied expression.

'Serves you right, bastard…'

The sorcerer poured himself some more wine, glanced at the tube of synthpaste with unrestrained horror, and then furtively moved it further away from himself. Finally, he looked at Sunny and lingered for a few moments.

Then, the immortal asked:

"So, Sunless. Now that we had a splendid... an unforgettable... breakfast, are you going to tell me where the glass knife is?"

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Sunny hesitated for a bit, then answered with a measured thought:

"I might. I need to know a few things first, though."

Noctis sighed with disappointment, then reluctantly shrugged.

"Knowing things is very overrated, if you ask me. But I understand… creatures of Shadow are known to be drawn to mysteries, after all. What is it that you are curious about?"

Sunny slowly inhaled, thinking. There were many things he wanted to learn… but the most important of them was rather simple. It carried the most weight for his plans and his future… was Noctis really capable of defeating the other immortals and breaking Hope's chains?

It certainly didn't seem so… as far as Chain Lords went, the sorcerer was not the most fearsome and terrifying. In fact, his whole persona

and attitude made him look rather harmless. Sunny knew, of course, that it was just a mask, and that there was vast and dreadful power hiding beneath it… but would that power be enough to challenge the likes of Solvane or the rulers of the Ivory City?

Both factions had armies, countless Awakened, and enough resources to wage a war for centuries, while Noctis only had himself and a few Sailor Dolls. So was his desire to unleash hell upon the shattered kingdom just madness, or did he have a solid reason to be confident that there was at least a chance of victory?

Sunny was going to make a decision on whether or not to join the sorcerer in this insane endeavor, after all, so knowing the answer was of utmost importance. His life depended on it.

He hesitated, and then said… or rather, thought:

"How many knives do you already possess?"

Noctis smiled radiantly, then answered in a carefree tone. His answer, however, was not at all what Sunny hoped and expected to hear:

"What do you mean? I don't have any!"

Sunny's face twitched, and the porcelain cup suddenly exploded in his hand. He was too shocked to pay it any attention, though.

"What? How… how can you not have a single knife?! You have to have the one entrusted to you, at least!"

The sorcerer waved a hand.

"Oh… I used to have one, true, but it is, sort of… well, things happened, and now I don't have it anymore."

Sunny stared at the immortal Transcendent with a stunned expression. He was so befuddled that he even forgot to remove his hand from the emerald amulet.

"This guy can't be that insane… right? How is he going to wage war against all of the Kingdom of Hope if he doesn't even have a single

knife?! I have more of them than he does, goddammit!"

Noctis laughed.

"So fierce, so straightforward! Ah, but don't worry about it, Sunless."

He remained silent for a few moments, drinking his wine, and then sighed.

"You see… in the beginning, there were seven knives, entrusted to the seven of us to hold the fate of another in their hands. The Iron Knife, the Wooden Knife, the Ember Knife, the Glass Knife, the Ivory Knife, the Obsidian Knife… and the Ruby Knife."

The sorcerer stared into the distance, as if remembering the past. A dark expression appeared on his face.

"The Iron Knife was used and destroyed, and so was the Ember Knife. So, only five remain. However… through coincidence, or maybe fate, none of the Chain Lords now possess one, except for Solvane, who wields her own fate and not that of the other."

He smiled.

"You see, the Shadow hid the Glass knife before his death. No one knows where it is. The Obsidian Knife had been entrusted to the One in the North, but she lost it to me in a game of wit…"

Sunny growled.

"Wait… didn't you lose that one, too? How the hell did you manage to lose two of the damned knives?!"

Noctis giggled.

"Oh… actually, I lost three. I had the Ivory Knife too, at some point..."

Sunny groaned, then grabbed his head.

"What is wrong with you... why is all of this so confusing..."

The sorcerer remained silent, smiling politely. Finally, he sighed.

"Oh, you are right. It is very convoluted, I guess, for someone who hasn't been living it all for centuries. So… let me start at the beginning, and explain to you the fate of each of the knives. Then, you will understand why I dare to challenge all the other Chain Lords, and how I hope to defeat them."

Sunny grimaced, then nodded dejectedly. Noctis poured himself more wine, remained silent for a few moments, and then spoke:

"The Glass knife is the most simple to trace..."

# Chapter-658: Seven Knives

Sitting on a plush cushion with a glass of fine wine in his hand, Noctis recounted the fates of the seven divine knives.

"The Iron Knife was destroyed when Lady Aidre was murdered, and the Ember Knife was stolen and destroyed when the Shadow took his own life. Of the remaining five knives, the Glass knife is the most simple to trace. It belonged to the Shadow, and now, it is where the Shadow had hidden it."

He paused, and then continued:

"The Ruby Knife... that one was entrusted to me. Some time ago, well, I was a bit concerned about my state of mind. Hope's madness is very insidious, Sunless, and not even someone like me is immune to it. So, frightened of what I might do, I gave it to… a dear friend, of sorts… for safekeeping. Which means that you and I know the location of two knives already."

The sorcerer sipped his wine and frowned.

"Then there is the Obsidian knife, which I won from the One in the North in a game of wit. The others weren't happy at all that I possessed two knives, so I, uh… placed it on the altar in my Sanctuary and proclaimed that everyone who manages to gather enough of my coins can take it."

A heavy sigh escaped from Sunny's lips.

"You did… what?"

What was wrong with that guy? It was a relic created by Sun God they were talking about, the key to an immortal's death! Why would he just put it where everyone could see it and even put a price tag on it? What madness was this?!

Noctis shrugged with a guilty look.

"Listen… those coins are very precious, I'll let you know! Who could have thought that someone would actually be crazy enough to collect them all? But, uh… someone did. A very determined and reckless young man, in fact. That daredevil took the knife and disappeared. He was probably killed for it, but where and how, no one knows.

The Obsidian Knife was lost… but as I said, these knives never remain lost for long. And here you are, Sunless, wielding it. So…"

The sorcerer raised a hand and showed Sunny three elegant fingers.

"That is three. The next one is the most curious… the Ivory Knife. It was entrusted to Sevras, the Sun Lord, who gave it to his twin brother, the Sun Prince. And that is where things get strange. The Sun Prince came to me one day with an unusual request. You see, he had hidden the Ivory Knife, and wanted for me to erase the memories of where from his mind.

He also wanted me to make him forget that request."

Sunny shuddered.

'He… he destroyed those memories on purpose? Even before the terrible torture?'

Noctis sighed.

"While my Aspect has to do with souls, I was very close to Aidre, the Priestess of Heart God, before she was killed by Solvane… that cursed murderer. So, I inherited a few things and a lot of knowledge from her. That was why the Sun Prince came to me, although I still don't know what his motive was.

Regardless, I agreed to help him, and removed the memory of the Ivory Knife's secret location from his mind. However…"

The sorcerer smiled.

"...I did not just destroy it. That would be too boring, don't you think? Instead, I kept the memory for myself and eventually retrieved the

Ivory Knife."

Sunny shook his head.

"So where is it? How did you manage to lose that one, too?"

The immortal Transcendent shrugged.

"Well… the One in the North was still angry with me and wanted a rematch. The stakes were high, and that time, sadly, I didn't win. She got the Ivory Knife, and then threw it into the Sky Below. That was very silly of her. It is impossible to really lose one of the knives forever, so it was bound to return one day. And recently, it did… I don't know where it is, but it is back, that is for sure."

Sunny looked at him for a while, a somber expression on his face.

He was pretty certain that he knew who had the Ivory Knife… Mordret, the Prince of Nothing. And if that fiend wielded it, even gods would not be able to predict what was going to happen.

Noctis, however, didn't seem concerned. He sipped his wine with a smile:

"No matter where it is, it will turn up soon enough. So, the only knife that remains is the Wooden Knife, which is in Solvane's possession. This one is the simplest to get, although not the easiest. The murderous witch, you know, is more than ready to give it to anyone whom she deems worthy enough to try and kill her. So, we don't even need to search for it.

Sooner or later, it will fall into our hands all by itself."

Sunny remained silent for a bit, then said in a somber tone:

"So let me get this straight. There are five knives… the Obsidian Knife is in my possession, and the Glass Knife is hidden in a place that is only known to me. The Ruby Knife is hidden in a place only known to you. The Wooden Knife will be given to us by Solvane if we defeat her… and the Ivory Knife is somewhere out there, being pulled toward all this mess by fate."

The sorcerer nodded with a smile.

"Indeed! So, you see… while I do not possess any of the knives yet, getting three out of the five would not be too difficult, and the fourth one will naturally appear on my path. Four out of five… it doesn't look that crazy anymore, don't you think?"

Sunny hesitated.

Yes… it only looked very crazy instead of utterly crazy now. But all he needed was to know that there was a chance of victory, and now, it seemed that there was. Noctis, eccentric and unreliable as he seemed, had not made the decision based on nothing.

The sorcerer glanced at him and raised an eyebrow.

"So, Sunless… are you going to share the location of the Glass Knife with me, and help me free Hope? Shall we break her chains and free this land, and ourselves, of a fate worse than death? What do you think?"

Sunny sighed.

That was a very troublesome question... and completely inescapable, at that. However, he could not answer it yet. Looking at the immortal sorcerer, he said:

"I can't make that decision alone. I need to discuss it with my friends first."

Noctis blinked.

"Oh… well, why not? It is always good to have loyal friends. Where are they?"

Sunny shifted slightly.

"That, uh… I don't know."

The sorcerer scratched the back of his head with a perplexed expression.

"I guess we'll have to find them first, then! Tell me, what are their names?"

Sunny looked away, then cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Uh… I don't know that, either."

Who knew what names the members of the cohort received in the Nightmare?

Noctis stared at him for a few moments, then asked in an even tone:

"...You don't know the names of your friends? How... interesting. Well, how do they look, then?"

Sunny smiled sheepishly… or rather, he tried. With his bestial face and sharp fangs, the result was far from being as innocent and apologetic as he would have wanted it to be.

"Actually… I don't know how they look, either."

The immortal Transcendent slowly took a sip of wine, remained silent for a bit, then spoke.

"So, if I understood correctly, you won't tell me about the Glass Knife until you have consulted with your friends, but you don't know where they are, what their names are, and how they look. Did I get it all?"

Sunny shifted awkwardly, then shrugged.

"Yes. But… they were supposed to leave me clues of their whereabouts on the Iron Hand island. That's something, right?"

Noctis emptied his glass and looked at him with a strange smile.

"Sunless… how do I say this… there is no island by that name in the Kingdom of Hope…"

'Oh… right.'

The iron giant might have been still alive and in possession of both of

his arms, so there would not be an Iron Hand island, indeed. Sunny shook his head.

"Ah, you just know it by another name. It does exist, don't worry. Actually, it is right here, near the Sanctuary. So, I will have to go there first, before giving you an answer."

Noctis looked at him, blinked a couple of times, and then sighed.

"...Alright, then. In that case, wait for a week or two before your new heart settles. Traveling before that would be very unwise… but after that, do go and find your friends. Invite them here, actually! I doubt that there's a friend of yours who is better, smarter, and more beautiful than I, but I'm sure that they are all nice people… uh, or demons… or whatever they are."

He smiled, and then winked at Sunny with a slightly mischievous look.

"...I can't wait to meet them!"

# Chapter-659: A Rest Before the War

Sunny did not fully understand what the sorcerer meant by saying that the new heart needed time to settle. Physically, he felt fine… great, even. Both of his hearts were beating steadily in his chest, powerful and dependable like relentless machines. However, he had not put them under any strain since the battle with Nightmare, so there was no way of telling how they would behave in a crisis.

Remembering the frightening pain of having his heart give out, Sunny decided to take the immortal's word for it and allow himself to rest.

He needed rest, anyway.

While his body had healed, the mind was not that resilient. Sunny felt that his mental state was not in the best of shapes… however, strangely, it was not as bad as he would have expected.

After the hellish two months he had spent in the Red Colosseum with Elyas, their subsequent escape, and the young man's death, Sunny had been numb and apathetic for a long time. He had gone through the motions of pursuing a simple goal without much emotion, hiding in the darkness as he traveled across the Kingdom of Hope, too hurt and defeated to feel anything.

Already in a damaged and vulnerable state, he had been then thrust into the harrowing succession of nightmares and forced to experience one hideous torment after another. At this point, Sunny could have broken… but instead, unexpectedly, he had found himself full of rapacious determination.

That determination had banished the suffocating lethargy and allowed him to endure countless nightmares and continue to fight,

until there were none left. It was as though the two ghastly experiences clashed and counteracted each other, leaving him in a semblance of a healthy state.

Or maybe it was just the matter of suffering a bitter defeat by Solvane's hand, but then refusing to give up and clawing his way to victory in the battle against Nightmare. That victory, costly as it had been, ignited his tortured spirit despite all the suffering it brought, the same way that the previous defeat had extinguished it.

Well… healthy was a strong word. Perhaps functioning was more suitable.

He could still feel barely closed wounds in his mind, which sometimes made their existence known. And added to that was the invisible, insidious poison of Hope…

Yes, a week or two of rest did not sound too bad. Sunny had a feeling that later, there would not be such an opportunity again.

…After their breakfast conversation, Noctis offered to host him in the luxurious residence. However, Sunny felt that sharing a living space with the eccentric sorcerer would not have been very conducive to peaceful restoration, so he politely refused. In the end, he settled in spacious quarters on the opposite side of the ring of menhirs, close to where his small room had been in the future.

His new one was larger and much better furnished. It was comfortable, beautiful, and safe. However, Sunny didn't like to stay inside the room for too long… being surrounded by its stone walls reminded him of the dungeon of the Red Colosseum too much, so he spent most of his days in the inner garden of the Sanctuary.

The people living in the former Temple of the Moon did not seem as perturbed by seeing a horned demon walk among them as the humans of the waking world would have been, especially since they knew that Sunny had arrived with Noctis himself… however, they were still tense and apprehensive around him. In the end, Sunny found himself being avoided at all costs, which suited him fine.

Not wishing to disturb anyone unnecessarily, he tended to remain in

a corner of the garden where very few people ever appeared… coincidentally, it was the same place where he used to sell soul shards in the future. His favorite stone, sadly, was usually taken by the leper whose body and disfigured face were covered with dirty bandages.

Oh, well… life couldn't always be perfect.

The first time Sunny sat down on the grass a few meters away from the leper, he spared the four-armed monster a short glance, lingered for a few moments, and then said in an ugly, grating, hoarse voice:

"...What kind of a creature are you?"

Sunny looked at the leper, not really wishing to engage in a conversation, then reluctantly produced the emerald amulet and answered.

"A demon. What kind of a creature are you?"

The leper smiled, causing a bit of yellow pus to seep from beneath the bandages covering his face.

"...A cripple."

Sunny studied the man, then made a grimace and asked in a sullen tone:

"I won't catch whatever it is that you have, will I?"

The leper let out a creaky chuckle.

"...No. I'm not diseased. Just… burned."

Sunny tilted his head a little, then shrugged and turned away.

So, the leper was not a leper. His body was just severely burned, and judging by the fact that the rags covering the bandages seemed to have been pristine white once, he had probably come to the Sanctuary from the Ivory City. Sunny wasn't sure that he wanted to know how a citizen of the Sun God's stronghold ended up with those burns.

…The memory of their lord's torture was still fresh in his mind.

They didn't speak after that, remaining in indifferent silence.

Looking at the empty corner of the beautiful garden around them and the distant figures of humans going about their lives, Sunny couldn't help but remember his first day at the Academy. Back then, two outcasts — Cassie and himself — had been segregated from the rest of Sleepers in a similar fashion.

Suddenly in a somber mood, he put the amulet away and thought:

'Some things never change, do they?'

…Of course, he would have preferred to be in the company of a beautiful oracle instead of a hideous cripple. That was only fair, considering that the cripple would have without a doubt preferred company of someone like Cassie to that of a ferocious-looking demon, as well.

With a sigh, Sunny threw these thoughts out of his head and closed his eyes, trying to meditate.

Two weeks… that was all the time he had to prepare himself for the encroaching hell of an obliterating war.

# Chapter-660: Shadow Arrows

For the next several days, Sunny did nothing but sleep, rest, and practice weaving. His two new wooden fingers were able to channel essence, which showed just how incredible Noctis was at his craft. However, they could not touch the ethereal strings. It seemed that only Sunny's own flesh and bone were capable of that.

He was already accustomed to manipulating the shadow strings without those fingers, though, so the task had not grown much harder. There was also the long needle that shone with faint golden radiance to help him along. In those several days, Sunny made a bit of progress in his attempts to copy the simplest of enchantments.

...He also successfully destroyed several more Memories, which really stung his newly repaired hearts.

'Ah, curses…'

Sunny stared at the rain of disappearing sparks that had been an enchanted buckler just a few moments ago and sighed. Another failure, another lost Memory. He was going through his collection of them way too fast… at that point, he was starting to wonder if there was a better use for it.

Saint's shadow fragment counter was still at [59/200], and now, he had another Shadow to feed. Nightmare also demanded his fair share of resources to reach the next Rank, and his appetite was even steeper. Currently, the dark courser was at [1/300], and that single fragment came from a Memory Sunny had fed him to check if the horse also consumed them.

The only silver lining was that Nightmare was still of the Awakened Rank, and as such, gained more sustenance from weaker Memories. Getting him to three hundred was going to require about the same amount as what Saint needed to get to two.

…That was another reason why Sunny wanted to master at least the very foundation of weaving. If he could create even the simplest Memories himself, he would effectively gain the ability to convert soul shards into shadow fragments, as far as Saint and Nightmare were concerned. Probably.

He already knew enough to try, actually, and only lacked a few shards to experiment. However, the ability to copy and modify enchantments seemed even more alluring. Just imagining the utility of such a skill made him tremble with excitement.

But enough was enough! He could not endure the heartbreaking sorrow of losing another Memory today. With each of them he destroyed, Sunny could practically see potential credits disappearing from his theoretical bank account.

Shaking his head dejectedly, he returned the needle into the maw of the Covetous Coffer, dismissed the little box, and headed toward the door of his room.

It was time for some fresh air.

Finding his way to the familiar corner of the garden, Sunny noticed the motionless figure of the bandaged cripple and ignored him, then sat down on the grass some distance away. The two of them were perfectly content pretending that the other didn't exist. After that first conversation, neither uttered a single word… which was a beautiful thing.

'If only all humans were that reticent…'

The cripple never bothered him, and so, Sunny liked him a lot. They had a perfect understanding.

Closing his eyes, Sunny meditated for a while, but then grew bored. He still had a few hours to kill before dinner, and there was nothing to do. Well, that was not a problem… really, there always was a mountain of things he had wanted, but never found time to address. For example, he was very curious to study the spellweave of the Shadow Lantern… it was a Divine Memory, after all.

But just the thought of staring at the inhuman complexity of weaves again made his mood grow foul, so Sunny decided to return to that task sometime later.

What else was there?

Come to think of it… he had not practiced archery for a long time now. His skill in that regard was still very far from satisfactory.

Sunny thought for a bit, then stood up and summoned Morgan's Warbow. The beautiful black bow weaved itself from scarlet sparks, which were the same color as its grip and string, as well as the small brand in the shape of a straight sword piercing straight through an anvil that was burned into its surface.

He turned slightly and glanced at the grey stone of one of the giant menhirs that loomed some distance away. Surely, the ancient stone pillar that had withstood a thousand years in perfect condition, and was going to withstand thousands more, would not be damaged if he used it for target practice…

Not that Sunny cared too much. Noctis would just have to produce a new menhir if he destroyed one… or several… the bastard owed him this much, at least!

With a short sigh, he raised the bow, placed his fingers on the string, and strained his muscles to pull it back.

Due to the [Unbending] enchantment of the fearsome warbow, Sunny needed all of his might, as well as the help of the shadows, just to draw the string… no mundane human would have ever been able do that, and even among the Awakened, only those with Aspects providing exceptional physical enhancement could hope to succeed.

But thanks to that, every arrow sent flying by the black bow went especially far, and hit with devastating strength. And speaking of arrows…

As Sunny was drawing the string, a shadow appeared on it, then grew heavy and solid, turning from a ghostly shade into a sharp arrow. The other enchantment of Morgan's Warbow, [Soul Arrows], allowed it to

attune to the soul of the wielder and create arrows that shared its affinity.

The arrow Sunny just created was utterly black, with dark fletching and a narrow head that seemed to be made out of a sharp piece of obsidian. This was a shadow arrow, which flew swiftly and didn't produce any sound at all. It was also perfect for finding cracks in the enemy's armor.

Actually, he could create a different kind of arrow, too, due to his high divine affinity. Those arrows were lustrous and seemed to be forged out of pale gold, their broadheads perfect for slicing flesh and causing terrible wounds. There was probably another quality to them, but Sunny had yet to figure it out.

…In any case, that didn't matter right now.

Bringing the string to his ear with some effort, Sunny struggled to hold it in place, then closed one eye, took aim, and jerked his fingers away from the arrow. The string hit the inner side of Sunny's forearm, and the black arrow shot forward with incredible speed.

Attracted by the sound, the cripple turned his head and stared at Sunny from beneath his dirty bandages.

A moment later, the arrow hit the giant menhir… completely off the mark. He had aimed at a tiny crack on the surface of the ancient stone, but had not managed to strike anywhere near it.

Looking down at his forearm, which now had a deep cut, Sunny clicked his tongue and let out a dissatisfied growl.

Then, he wrapped his arm with a piece of cloth, summoned a second arrow, and repeated the process, this time almost managing to miss the menhir completely.

'Damnation!'

It seemed that his accuracy had only reduced in the past months. How had he even managed to grow worse?

"...You're doing it all wrong."

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then turned around and stared at the cripple without any amusement in his frightening black eyes. Perhaps he was hasty to commend the man for his quiet and reticent nature… who wanted to hear that hideously grating voice, anyway?

Producing the emerald amulet, Sunny thought with some irritation:

"Oh yeah? What, you are an archery expert now?"

The cripple remained silent for a while, then turned away.

"I used to be a captain in the Sun Legion. Before…"

He sighed, and then smiled a little:

"I led a hundred brave warriors into battle, for the glory of Lord Sevirax and the Ivory City."

The cripple grew silent, and then added quietly:

"...Before."

Sunny stared at the bandages that covered the man's burned body, then glanced at his soul, which was illuminated by a radiant core of an Awakened. So this guy used to be an officer serving one of the Sun immortals?

He hesitated for a moment, then asked:

"How'd you end up this messed up, then? Where do all these burn scars come from? Did the Warmongers catch you?"

The cripple stared into the distance for some time, then slowly shook his head.

"...You have plenty of scars yourself, demon, some as terrible as mine. That wicked one around your neck… where did it come from?"

Sunny looked down at the crestfallen man, then grinned.

"What, that thing? Funny you should ask… you see, I did actually get

captured by the Warmongers once. So, to escape, I tricked the biggest and meanest of them into cutting my head off. Then, I killed him, picked it up, and put it back on. True story."

He grew silent for a while, and then added nonchalantly:

"...Oh, and I killed Solvane too! You know who that is, right?"

The cripple stared at him with wide eyes, shock, awe, and confusion mixing in them in equal measure. Sunny just wanted to mock the guy a little, but the poor fool seemed to have actually believed him. What an idiot…

Actually… something about the cripple's eyes seemed strangely familiar, at least in that moment…

Sunny suddenly froze and stared at the bandages hiding the man's disfigured face, his mouth turning dry.

A few moments passed in a strange silence.

And then, both of them spoke at the same time:

"...Kai?"

"...Sunny?!"

# Chapter-661: Precious Tether

The towering demon and the hideous cripple stared at each other for a bit, their eyes wide with shock.

"No way… he was here all along? Wait, who dared to do this to Kai?! When I find the bastard, I'll tear them limb from limb!"

Sunny was so stunned that he even failed to let go of the emerald amulet. He gritted his fangs, then asked a question, at the same time as Kai did:

"...Who did this to you?!"

"...Why are you so tall?!"

Flustered, the two fell silent for a moment.

Then, Sunny reached out and grabbed the cripple into a crushing hug, wrapping all of his four arms around him. Who knew… who knew that this repulsive body, which was covered in dirty bandages that smelled of blood and pus, would suddenly become so precious and dear to him?

"I was put into a body of a demon… why wouldn't I be tall, you idiot?"

Kai let out a startled yelp, struggled weakly, and then patted Sunny on one of the arms.

"Argh… Sunny… I am very glad to see you, as well… but… my burns!"

Sunny jolted, then hurriedly let go of the cripple's body and gave him an apologetic look.

…Beneath that simple emotion, though, a dark ocean of fury

smoldered with dangerous flames.

"Sorry… I didn't... Kai! You're alive! Damn, I am so happy to see you! I was starting to wonder… wonder if any of you guys have made it alive…"

Kai looked at him, then smiled. Through the gaps in the bandages, his disfigured face looked ghastly and hideous… but the sparks glinting in his eyes were the same. He sighed.

"Yeah. I was fearing the same."

The young man hesitated, and then added, his voice suddenly ringing hollow:

"After the Iron Hand island… I almost gave up hope. I didn't think that I'll see any of you ever again."

Sunny frowned, confused by Kai's words. He dismissed his bow, and then thought tensely:

"...Why? What is on the Iron Hand island?"

The cripple looked at him with surprise.

"You haven't been there?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No. I was going to travel there in a week, after my new heart settles. Ah… I made a deal with a sorcerer, you see, to replace a heart I lost…"

Kai stared at him for a bit, then looked down and let out a heavy sigh.

"I see. Well… there's not much to tell."

He remained silent for a few moments, and then said quietly, his hoarse voice growing even more creaky and grating:

"There was no sign that you or Cassie had ever managed to reach the

rendezvous point… even though months had already passed. But Effie… Effie left a message there, carved into a stone pillar."

"So Effie is alive, too!"

Sunny clenched his fists, excited.

Of course she was alive! That glutton would never die and leave all the food in two worlds uneaten!

Encouraged, he eagerly asked:

"What message did she leave?"

Kai looked away, as if reluctant to answer.

After a while, he finally opened his mouth and said quietly:

"It was… it was just one sentence."

The young man glanced at Sunny, then added in a somber tone:

"Do not come to the Temple of the Chalice…"

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As it turned out, Kai had reached the Sanctuary two weeks before Sunny. Although he did not go into detail, the archer explained that he had been sent into the body of an officer in the army of the Ivory City, and got entangled in the conflict between the Sun people and the Warmongers for the first months of the Nightmare.

Eventually, he managed to escape and made his way east. The journey was slow and torturous because of how terribly mangled his body was, but he somehow made it to the Iron Hand island alive… if just barely.

There, his hope of reuniting with his friends was cruelly crushed by the fact that neither Sunny nor Cassie seemed to have made it, while Effie had only left an ominous message imploring them to not try to find her.

Consumed by terrible pain and despair, Kai left his own message on the island and continued to the Sanctuary, where, as he had heard, stragglers like him could find refuge and shelter.

He remained there since, trying to recover as much strength as he could and hoping against all logic that the others were going to read the message he had left and come to the Sanctuary, too. And then, through a strange twist of fate, Sunny arrived despite not even visiting the Iron Hand island!

Kai shook his head and said, his voice full of amusement:

"...How did you even end up here? Arriving on that flying ship, no less. Sunny, do you know who its captain is?"

Sunny nodded.

"Who else? It's Noctis… that guy goes around insisting that he is now my best friend. You see... the Spell sent me into the Warmonger's territory, where I was captured and forced to participate in their wicked Trials. I barely escaped with my life, and stumbled upon him while fleeing to the Southern Island.

He needed a favor from a shadow creature, and I needed passage to the eastern parts of the Chained Isles. So… that's how I arrived here on that ship."

He grew silent for a bit and scowled, thinking feverishly.

Do not come to the Temple of the Chalice… that was what Effie had written on a stone pillar. However, Sunny had heard of the place before, in the nightmare of the Shadow Lord.

Give the glass knife to the War Maiden in the Temple of the Chalice — that was what the immortal Shadow had told the original owner of the four-armed demon's body. And that was the secret Noctis wanted to learn from Sunny, while Sunny wanted to find his friends. So many coincidences...

Kai cleared his throat.

"You… you know who he is, right? Lord Noctis is the master of this

place, as well as one of the five Transcendent immortals. Throughout the Kingdon of Hope, he is feared and revered in equal measure, and his name is synonymous with mystery and power… as well as debauchery, mischief, and disaster.

A being like him… although Lord Noctis is rumored to possess a merciful heart, he is still dangerous and terrifying. Sunny... are you sure that you should be getting entangled with such a being?"

Sunny glanced at Kai and remained silent for a while, then said in a grim tone:

"...There is not much choice. He is the axis of this Nightmare. Dangerous, terrifying... Noctis is all that, and also so much more. However, all of that is not very important right now."

He sighed, and then turned toward the residence of the frightening immortal with a dark expression on his face.

"What's important right now… is that he can help us find Effie…"

# Chapter-662: Demon's Bargain

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then looked at Kai and said with determination.

"Let's go."

Kai nodded and followed the four-armed demon, pushing forward his bandaged body with visible effort. Seeing his friend's suffering, Sunny gritted his teeth.

The archer, meanwhile, glanced at him with a grim expression, and then said in his new, unfamiliar and ugly voice:

"Sunny… I have one question. Can you answer it?"

Sunny slowed down and turned to him, a deep scowl contorting the bestial lines of his face.

"Of course. What is it?"

Kai remained silent for a bit, then asked cautiously:

"Uh… where, exactly, are we going?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then tilted his head a little.

"Oh, right. Where else? We are going to talk to Noctis!"

With that, he turned around and continued walking toward the immortal sorcerer's residence.

The archer hurried to catch up, then said in a stifled tone:

"Ah… that Noctis? The immortal Transcendent? Blessed of the Moon, Crimson Beast of Twilight, Chain Lord of the Kingdom of Hope, and all that?"

Sunny glanced at him, then shrugged.

"Yes, that Noctis. Don't worry, though… he is indeed terrifying, but not unreasonable…"

Together, they crossed the garden of the Sanctuary and approached the beautifully engraved wooden door. A pair of Sailor Dolls were standing guard outside, their indifferent faces staring at them with hollow stillness. Noticing Sunny, one of them moved aside and knocked on the door, which then opened all by itself.

The two of them entered and froze, unsure how to react.

"What the hell…"

Noctis was levitating above the floor, his legs crossed and his eyes closed. He might have seemed like a wise sage in the middle of a deep meditation, if not for dozens of empty amphoras of wine that floated all around him. The terrifying Chain Lord, Blessed of the Moon, the Crimson Beast of Twilight… was dead drunk.

Hearing someone enter, Noctis lazily opened one eye and stared at Sunny, then at Kai. Finally, he landed on the floor and yawned, causing all the amphoras to fall down and shatter, sending drops of wine flying everywhere and staining the luscious carpets.

"Ah, Sunless! What a nice surprise, to see you so soon. And… uh… you brought someone with you? What a hideous creature… wait, did I say that out loud? No, surely not… I am too wise and courteous to make a rude remark like that, of course… nice to meet you, whoever you are! Welcome… ah, to my quarters."

He gave them a radiant smile, then waved a hand, causing the whole residence to shudder and the shards of the amphoras to disappear without a trace. Then, Noctis walked over to a small table, picked up a fresh apple, and glanced at his guests with a curious expression:

"To what do you owe the honor?"

'To what do we owe… wait, wasn't it supposed to be the other way around?'

Sunny frowned, then glanced at Kai, who was staring at the immortal sorcerer with an inexorable expression on his burned, disfigured face. Finally, he cleared his throat and turned to Noctis:

"Actually, I am here to deliver some good news. Do you remember the friends I told you about? Well, this is one of them. And… yes, you did say it out loud."

The sorcerer stared at Kai, blinked a couple of times, then took a bite out of the apple.

"Oh, so this is one of the friends that you were supposed to find after visiting an island that doesn't exist, despite not knowing how they look, where they are, and what they are called? He just happened to be here, in my Sanctuary? How… fortunate."

Sunny smiled.

"Indeed! This is Nightingale, my dear friend. A man with a voice of an angel, and a face to go along with it."

Kai spared him a sidelong glance, then bowed slightly and forced out a grating, creaky greeting:

"It is… nice to meet you, Lord Noctis."

The sorcerer shuddered and looked right and left, then shook his head.

"Gods, Sunless… do not ever mention those creatures again, even in jest. Angels are not something to be called upon, whether by name or in passing."

Then, he briefly touched the symbol of the moon on his forehead and sighed.

"...Anyway, I am glad that you have found one of your friends. Have the two of you discussed my proposal?"

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then answered somberly:

"No, we have not. We still need to find two more friends for that.

However…"

He sighed, knowing that the luxury of having a choice was looking more and more distant by the day. But he needed the sorcerer's help and his knowledge to find and retrieve Effie from the mysterious Temple of the Chalice… in that particular matter, he was willing to compromise.

Even if he gave up the secret of the Glass Knife, he would still be in possession of the Obsidian one.

Sunny crossed two of his four arms, and said:

"I am willing to share the location of the Shadow Lord's knife with you, in exchange for some assistance."

Noctis stared at him for some time, then suddenly grinned.

"Really? What assistance do you require? I am the most helpful person in the Kingdom of Hope, you know!"

Sunny raised two fingers.

"First, you will help treat my friend's wounds. Second, you will help us rescue another of our other friends from the place she is being held in."

He thought for a bit, and then raised a third finger.

"Oh! And also, coins. You will give me lots of Noctis coins."

The sorcerer ate his apple in silence for a bit, then laughed.

"Well… I think I can do two out of those three things, at least. No problem. So, tell me... where is your other friend being held?'

Sunny lingered for a few moment, still hesitant to make the bargain. Finally, he sighed, and said:

"Temple of the Chalice."

Noctis suddenly choked on the apple, coughed violently a few times,

then grabbed a glass of wine and nervously emptied it. Then, with a flushed face, he glanced at Sunny and forced out a strange smile.

"...One. I think I can do one out of those three things, at least…"

# Chapter-663: Heralds of War

Sunny scowled, surprised by that reaction. He glanced at Kai, then motioned for him to sit down. From the looks of it, this conversation was going to be a long one.

The archer cautiously lowered himself onto a nearby chair and let out a quiet groan of pain, then looked around, a hint of curiosity appearing in his cloudy eyes. His gaze lingered on various pieces of furniture and exquisite decorations, then finally settled on the flustered sorcerer.

Noctis seemed to have regained his composure somewhat. He stared at his half-eaten apple with a somber expression, then threw it away and sat down himself.

A heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

"The three things you asked for… are not that easy to accomplish."

The immortal glanced at Kai, then raised one elegant finger:

"I can help your friend, Nightingale, recover from his wounds… somewhat. Those burns were not delivered by mundane flames, and so, even I would not be able to restore that which was destroyed completely. With my help, he will be able to regain most of his strength and vitality. I can also repair the damage done to his soul. But the flames… their mark will remain.

Unless you want me to build him a completely new vessel, of course…"

Noctis smiled, and then glanced at one of the wooden mannequins, which was in the process of disposing of the carelessly discarded apple.

"Something like that, but much better!"

Kai shivered.

"Will I be able to draw a bow and control soul essence after you treat my body?"

The sorcerer nodded.

"Of course! You might even grow stronger than you were before. But your face… I am sorry to say this, Nightingale, but it will remain as hideous as it is now. The pain that consumes you will subside, but never go away completely. If you agree to transfer your soul into a doll, on the other hand, your strength will diminish slightly… but you won't have to endure that suffering anymore.

I can also promise to make a truly beautiful vessel for you, one worthy of carrying even the most radiant of souls."

The archer remained silent for a while, then smiled.

"...No need. This face suits me fine. As long as I can draw a bow and help my friends, I will be content."

Noctis looked at him silently, an expression of confusion written clearly on his face.

"But don't… don't you want to become beautiful?"

Kai chuckled, his voice hoarse and grating. Then, he shook his head and said simply:

"...I already am."

Both Noctis and Sunny stared at the archer with dubious expressions, thinking that he had lost his mind. Well… more than anyone else in the Kingdom of Hope had already lost theirs. His disfigured face was ugly, grotesque, and unsightly… what was he even trying to say?

However, it did not seem that Kai felt compelled to expand on that strange statement. He just remained silent, calmly looking at the sorcerer. After a few moments, Noctis turned away and shrugged:

"Well… as you wish. The treatment will be long and painful, but it can be done."

Then, he raised a second finger and glanced at Sunny.

"The other thing you asked for… lots of my coins, was it? To be honest… how do I say this… uh… no?"

Sunny blinked, surprised.

"What? Why?!"

The sorcerer yawned, then made a helpless gesture with his hands.

"What can I say? Making those coins takes time. Do you know how long it took me to create a few thousand before? Each coin contains a piece of a Corrupted soul, after all. That is the reason why they are so valuable, precious, and coveted by everyone in the Kingdom of Hope."

He thought for a few moments and added absentmindedly:

"Oh… now that you reminded me, only most of the souls were Corrupted. I think there were a few humans I fed to the Mimic, as well. Regardless, all those coins were consumed when that poor fool claimed the Obsidian Knife from the altar. So… if you really want me to make new ones… I guess I can quickly kill everyone here in the Sanctuary and cook up a hundred or two?"

Sunny shivered, then hurriedly raised his hands:

"No, no! No need! Uh… let's not kill anyone, yet…"

Noctis smiled.

"Are you sure? Well, alright. So then…"

He raised the third finger.

"Lastly, the Temple of the Chalice… I am sorry to say this, but there is absolutely no chance of me ever going anywhere near that place again. Not that I could, even if I wanted to. And I don't. Ever!"

Sunny stared at the sorcerer with a deep scowl, then gritted his teeth.

"Why? What is so terrible about that place?"

Noctis shivered, then sighed and nervously sipped his wine.

"Oh, it's not… it's not that it's terrible. It's just that men aren't allowed to enter the Temple, unless they are serving a woman. They put that rule in place… uh… after the last time I visited…"

Sunny really tried to not let his face change, and simply glared at Noctis, his eye twitching. Uncomfortable under that murderous gaze, the sorcerer shrunk and looked away.

A low growl escaped from Sunny's mouth.

"Who cares? You are one of the Chain Lords. What can they do if you decide to break that rule?"

Noctis chuckled nervously.

"You don't get it! Chain Lord or not... you see, Sunless, as I said, my lands became somewhat of a refuge for those who seek it. And one of the groups of refugees I sheltered was the remains of an ancient… an ancient and rather terrifying sect. This sect takes in orphaned girls, especially those born with red hair, and trains them to become perfect vessels of War.

His deadly tools, priestesses, and heralds… the War Maidens are not someone to be trifled with."

He grew silent for a moment, and then added:

"...In fact, they only needed my protection because there was a schism within the sect, and one of their disciples left to create her own cult. However… since no one can really leave that sect alive… her departure was not amicable. Those who survived it came here to build the Temple of the Chalice, and remained there since. Oh, and that runaway disciple of theirs… I think you have already met her..."

Sunny grew cold and leaned back, feeling both of his hearts skip a couple of beats. Then, he closed his eyes for a few moments, and

finally said in a hoarse voice:

"Do you mean to tell me… that the sect that dwells in the Temple of the Chalice… is where Solvane comes from?"

Noctis nodded and gave him a ghostly smile:

"...Exactly! That is where that fiend was raised. And there is a bunch of little monsters just like her being trained there as we speak. I mean, no one can really compare to Solvane, but they are not too far off! So you can understand why I am reluctant to break my word and make enemies of the War Maidens… right?"

Sunny remained silent for a while, and then sighed heavily.

Holding the emerald amulet in one of his calloused hands, he thought:

"Well... tough luck. Because that is exactly where the Glass Knife is…"

Despite his grim mood, Sunny felt a bit of vindictive satisfaction when he saw the sorcerer's handsome face pale, and the glass of wine slip from his hand…

# Chapter-664: Basic Logic

A tense silence settled in the opulent residence of the mad sorcerer… who, meanwhile, was staring at Sunny with an indescribable expression on his pale, beautiful face. Noctis didn't seem happy at all despite finally learning the secret that he had been searching for all this time.

In that silence, Kai's hoarse voice suddenly resounded, full of polite curiosity:

"I am very sorry… but that glass knife you are talking about… why exactly do we need it?"

Both Sunny and Noctis turned to him. After an awkward pause, the immortal scratched the back of his head and answered:

"Ah… that thing, you see, is the only thing that can kill Sevras, the blessed of the Sun. And I really, really want to kill him."

Noticing a slight confusion on the archer's face, he thought for a moment, and then added:

"Right, these days people call him Sevirax, the Ivory Lord. You have heard of him, yes?"

Kai lingered for a bit, then looked down at his bandaged hands and said evenly:

"...Yes. You might say that I have."

He closed his eyes for a moment, and then smiled.

"In that case, we must retrieve the Glass Knife. And our friend. Lord Noctis… surely, there is something that we can do? You know a lot about that sect of theirs. Is there a way for you to enter the Temple of

the Chalice, find both the knife and our friend, and bring them back to the Sanctuary?"

Noctis stared at him for a while, then shook his head.

"No, there is no way for me to invade the Temple. At least not without destroying it completely, which would doom that friend of yours along with the rest of the sect… sadly, that is also one of the places I can't infiltrate in disguise… uh, infiltrate it again, I mean…"

Sunny and Kai glanced at each other, and then, the archer cautiously asked:

"If that is the case… what if we infiltrate it, instead?"

The sorcerer stared at them with surprise, and then laughed:

"Sunless and Nightingale… what a strange pair you are! Do you not know fear? I have just told you how frightening the War Maidens are!"

Sunny smiled, showing his sharp fangs, and then shrugged. Kai shook his head and answered for both of them, saving him from having to do so:

"Oh, on the contrary. Both of us are actually very cowardly. But, Lord Noctis… you might not know this, but Sunless and I… we can be a bit frightening ourselves."

The immortal Transcendent gave them a dubious look, and then shook his head.

"Somehow, I believe it. But no, no, it doesn't matter! Even if you are willing, you can't get into the Temple of the Chalice. Only women are allowed inside, and not any women at that. They will only give passage to female warriors of utmost skill, those who are veiled in dread and the smell of numerous bloody battlefields… maybe with a couple of lowly servants, at best.

You are both men, so it is useless to even try."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then sighed deeply and said:

"Actually… that won't be a problem."

Noctis blinked a couple of times and looked at him with confused amusement.

"Uh… how so? Sunless…"

The sorcerer gave him a strange look, and then asked with a mischievous smile:

"...Is there something I don't know about you?"

Sunny glanced at him darkly, scowled, and answered in a sharp tone:

"There's plenty! But that was not what I meant. I just have a female warrior of dreadful skill... at hand."

With that, he summoned Saint. Two ruby flames ignited in the depths of his shadow, and then the taciturn demon stepped out of it, wreathed in darkness. Her graceful figure appeared in the middle of the sorcerer's residence, and then the Shadow turned her head slightly, staring at the master of the place with cold indifference.

Noctis looked back at her, his eyes widening. His lips trembled.

"That… that…"

The sorcerer leaned forward, his expression frozen, and then suddenly clenched his fists with excitement:

"...That armor! The design! The fit! Oh, gods… who forged that masterpiece?! Sunless, please tell me!"

Saint tilted her head a little, while Sunny and Kai stared at the immortal Transcendent with inexorable expressions. After a few moments of dead silence, Sunny cleared his throat.

"Uh… actually, I am not sure. Prince of the Underworld, I think. Wait, haven't you seen me wearing a similar armor?"

Noctis glanced at him with confusion, then waved a hand dismissively:

"Ah, if I did, you must have not done it justice. This beauty, however… so it was Hope's little brother, huh? Who knew he had such impeccable taste!"

Finally, the sorcerer became aware of his surroundings and moved his gaze up, staring right into Saint's ruby eyes. His smile widened, but then grew rather strange. He glanced at Sunny with confusion:

"Sunless… this is one of your Shadows, yes? How come she is more powerful than you? Oh, did you inherit this sublime creature from the Shadow Lord? That rogue… he had been hiding such a treasure from me all that time!"

Sunny did not like the way Noctis was looking at Saint one bit. In fact, he suddenly felt a very strong impulse to wipe the lecherous smile off the immortal's face… which would not have been very wise, considering who that immortal actually was…

He gritted his teeth.

"...No. If you must know, I've created her myself. And also, she can hear you. Have some manners, will you?"

Noctis froze, then flinched and suddenly turned very courteous.

"Uh… sorry…"

He glanced at Saint, then walked around her, studying the taciturn demon with a very serious expression. The Shadow didn't move, seemingly uncaring of his presence. Finally, the sorcerer returned to his previous spot and smiled.

"That Shadow of yours might indeed be allowed into the Temple of the Chalice. She has... a presence about her. Even I am impressed! The two of you will pose as her servants, I assume?"

Sunny and Kai looked at each other, then nodded. The sorcerer turned away, thinking, then said thoughtfully:

"That… might actually work. Once you are inside, you can find your friend and locate the Glass Knife. That will be extremely dangerous, but not impossible. If you succeed, I can ensure your safe escape…

however…"

Noctis glanced at them, his expression growing somber.

"Sunless, Nightingale… if things go wrong inside the Temple of the Chalice, even I won't be able to save you. You will be on your own… so ask yourself seriously whether or not rescuing your friend is worth risking your lives over. You can make new friends, you know… but you can only die once."

Kai looked at the immortal sorcerer, and smiled:

"...It's worth it."

Sunny wasn't so quick to speak. After a while, he snorted and looked away.

"I don't make friends easily, so the ones I do have are extremely valuable. One has to protect their valuables, you know? That's just basic logic…"

He glanced at Noctis with a dark expression and added:

"Besides, who says that you can only die once? I have already died a hundred times, and that was just after meeting you… killing me is really a very troublesome endeavor…"

# Chapter-665: Preparations

After their conversation with Noctis was done, Sunny and Kai left the sorcerer alone. The immortal needed some time to make preparations, so they had a few hours left before the archer's treatment was going to begin.

After that, they were not going to see each other again until it was over, which would take at least a week.

Walking through the beautiful garden of the Sanctuary, Kai remained silent for a bit, and then said with a smile:

"Well… I think that went well."

Sunny glanced at him with a dark expression.

"You think?"

The archer shrugged, then frowned a little. The bandages covering his disfigured face moved, revealing a confused expression.

"Did it not?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No. We have been swindled, actually. Think about it… I wanted to get three things out of Noctis in exchange for revealing the location of the Glass Knife to him. Heal you, rescue Effie, and receive his enchanted coins. Not only did he force the secret out of me without even lifting a finger, he even fooled us into retrieving the knife in his stead… while thinking that it was our own idea, no less."

He grimaced, then let out a heavy sigh.

"...Scary. He is a cunning trickster, and my own mind seems to be dulled by the curse of Hope. Still… all is well. Noctis will heal your

body, nothing else matters."

Kai frowned when Sunny mentioned Hope's influence, but didn't ask anything, revealing that he had made the discovery himself. After a while, he said:

"When you put it like that, I do feel a bit foolish. But, Sunny… if you knew that we were being swindled, why didn't you try to drive a harder bargain?"

Sunny shrugged.

"There was no point to. I did not expect him to honor all three of my requests, anyway… two of them were just for show. While those coins of his are useful, I can do without them. As for rescuing Effie, that is our own task. I would not have entrusted it to an outsider, especially an ancient Transcendent with mysterious motives."

He remained silent for a few moments, and then added:

"We will have to ally ourselves with at least one of the Chain Lords in order to conquer this Nightmare, but becoming dependent on someone else's strength is a slippery slope. In the end, we can only put trust in our own efforts."

Kai tilted his head a little.

"So… those two requests were just bait, and your real intention had only been to get Noctis to heal me?

Lost in thought, Sunny simply nodded.

The archer smiled, then mumbled under his nose:

"I wonder who swindled whom, then…"

They reached their corner of the garden in silence and sat down on the grass. There was so much Sunny wanted to tell Kai, and so much he wanted to ask. He was sure that Kai felt the same.

But without even having to say anything, both of them decided to remain silent. They had already shared some things about their

experiences in the Nightmare, and as for details… that was going to have to wait until the cohort was back together.

Even knowing that it was foolish, they both held on to the feeling that by postponing this conversation, they were somehow increasing the chances of the other two members joining them unharmed.

After a while, Kai asked:

"Do you… do you think that she is alright? Effie? From what Noctis said, that sect is incredibly ancient, formidable, and cruel. If Effie was sent into the body of a disciple, with her temper… I hate to admit it, but I am afraid for her. Plus, none of the maidens is allowed to leave that Temple alive. How are we going to take her away?"

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then shook his head.

"Effie is more resilient than any of us. Don't forget, she survived in the Dark City far longer than you or I… completely alone. She held the line during the siege of the Spire and survived that, too. Effie will be fine. The War Maidens are not as formidable as you might think, either. After all, the Temple of the Chalice is destroyed in the future, and all of them are dead.

I've seen the bones myself…"

His face grew somber when he remembered the furious wraiths whom he had slain to create his third core. Who could have known that the ruin he had already explored and the Temple of the Chalice were one and the same? Judging by the destruction that reigned over the ancient temple in the future, someone was going to obliterate the fearsome sect between then and now. The War Maidens weren't invincible.

Kai sighed.

"...What about Cassie? There is no sign of her. She is… she is not like the rest of us. Her combat skill is commendable, but her Aspect is not tailored toward direct confrontation. And with how terrible her Flaw is…"

He grew silent, reluctant to finish the thought.

Sunny grinned.

"Cassie? She is the last person you should be worried about. Believe me, she is doing fine. Probably better than any of us."

…At least, that was what Sunny wanted to believe. His Flaw did not prevent him from saying those words aloud, so he must have been convinced that the statement was true to some degree, at least.

However, that didn't stop his hearts from growing cold and heavy.

He sighed, and then added in a grim tone:

"Who you should really be worried about is our fifth… friend."

Kai frowned and looked at him with a dark expression.

"It has to be that person… right? The prince of Valor?"

Sunny hesitated, then nodded.

"That is what I believe, as well."

The archer gritted his teeth and turned away.

"...It doesn't matter. Here in the Nightmare, all of us are allies. Are we not?"

Sunny looked down, his black eyes growing even darker.

After a while, he said:

"We are meant to be. However, that doesn't mean that we have to be."

He sighed, and then looked at the people going about their lives in the distance.

"Mordret is… unpredictable. And dangerous. I don't know what his goals are, but in this Nightmare, his power would have grown considerably. Don't forget that he was the one who discovered this Seed, in the first place… and that wasn't by accident. He was searching for it on purpose. He is after something…"

Sunny grew silent for a few moments, and then added, his voice turning grim:

"Plus, there was already something wrong with Mordret in the waking world. Who knows what effect Hope had on him? If he had truly gone insane…"

He shuddered.

"...Then the immortal Saints might end up not being our biggest problem."

With that, Sunny stood up and summoned the vambrace of the Puppeteer's Shroud, then glanced at Kai with a strange glint in his eyes.

"Anyway, since we have a few hours left before Noctis straps you to a table and does Spell knows what to your body... how about you show me how to properly use a bow? While you still can... uh, while there's a chance, I mean..."

# Chapter-666: Dark Rider

The sun was slowly drowning in the darkness of the void, and as it did, a veil of shadows was devouring the world. The western horizon was still aflame with the scarlet pyre of the sunset, but the somber night was already approaching from the east.

On a desolate island covered by tall pillars of jagged rock, a numinous temple stood, its beautiful stone walls painted red by the light of the drowning sun. All around it, countless swords were thrust into the petrous ground, rising from it like a solemn graveyard of steel.

There was only one path through the forest of blades, and as the twilight of dusk approached it, a dull, echoing ringing suddenly resounded from the darkness, then traveled through it, slowly growing closer and closer.

It was the sound of adamantine hooves ringing against stone.

Soon, four crimson flames ignited in the shadows, and then revealed themselves to be four eyes. Two belonged to a stygian destrier, the other two to its dark rider.

The steed was black as night, with dreadful horns crowning its head. It walked forward with a steady pace, fearsome and noble, lean muscles rolling under its lusterless coat. The rider was a graceful woman in intricate onyx armor, her face hidden behind the visor of a closed helmet, with only ruby lights shining through it with indifferent resolve.

Her presence was both calm and fearsome, full of quiet confidence and frightening strength.

The blade of a great odachi rested on her shoulder, its steel as dark as the heart of the night.

…Two steps behind the taciturn knight, two creatures walked with their gazes lowered to the ground. One was a towering, four-armed demon dressed in a black kimono, his dark hair tied with a silk ribbon.

The other was a strange human with skin that resembled polished bark, wearing a fitting dark garment made of soft silk, his disfigured face hidden behind a wooden mask and drowning in the shadow of a deep hood. Neither of them was armed.

The dark knight led her horse to the first steps of the path through the graveyard of swords and stopped, waiting. Her ruby eyes burned with cold calmness, as if the woman had a heart made of stone, incapable of feeling fear, unease, or trepidation.

Her servants, however, were not as aloof. Both stole glances at the magnificent stone temple, tension clearly written on their faces. A few moments later, the human asked quietly:

"It is too late to turn back, isn't it?"

The demon did not respond… not that he was capable of speaking in the human tongue. Instead, he simply nodded, then froze, as if sensing something. The other servant sighed and grew silent, as well.

There was no one and nothing around them, just the pillars of jagged rocks and the swords thrust into the ground. The island was awash in the bloodred radiance of the dying sunset, with deep shadows nesting in the spots from where the sunlight had already fled. A gust of wind suddenly blew, bringing with it the smell of iron.

…And then, out of nowhere, they were surrounded by a dozen silent figures.

All of them were beautiful women, wearing light garments made of red silk. Their bodies were slender and supple, their skin smooth and soft… the sight of them might have been alluring if not for the sharp coldness of their eyes, the ruthless expressions written on their tantalizing faces, and the murderous glint of their blades, all aimed at the uninvited guests.

Sunny shivered.

'...Damnation.'

Noctis had not been joking when he described the War Maidens as fearsome. Even though these women were just Awakened, his intuition was screaming that they represented mortal danger.

However, Sunny did not need the help of his enhanced sixth sense to understand that… the feeling he got from the female warriors was the same as he had experienced a few times before in his life, when facing true battle masters.

Morgan of Valor had given him the same frightening sensation, as well as Auro of the Nine, Master Jet, Nephis, and a couple of others, all of them elite combatants of the highest tier. Some of these fiends he had fought and somehow survived, but not without shedding a lot of blood and receiving deep scars, if not on his body, then on his soul.

And right now, he was staring at twelve of such monsters… and these were just the sentinels, no doubt. Who knew what kind of battle saints would he meet inside the temple?

…No wonder this sect had been Solvane's cradle.

Full of bad premonitions, he made sure to not make any sudden movements and continued staring at the ground. His role during this part was rather simple... he just had to do nothing.

Her master might have been apprehensive, but Saint didn't seem concerned at all. She turned her head slightly and looked down at the War Maidens, her gaze as calm and indifferent as always. Noticing her calmness, a few of the female warriors gripped their weapons tighter.

One of them, a tall woman with red hair and eyes the color of steel, frowned a little, and then asked in a raspy voice:

"What brings you to the Temple of the Chalice, demoness?"

Saint, of course, remained silent. Instead, Kai took a step forward and

bowed, then spoke, his ugly voice sounding like grating scritching of rusty metal:

"Greetings, warriors. My lady…"

The War Maiden looked at him with distaste and interrupted:

"Who allowed you to speak, man?"

Kai remained bowed for a few moments, then straightened and looked at the woman from beneath his hood.

"My lady's voice is not for you to hear. She only speaks to those who bested her in combat… and thus, she has not spoken ever since taking this solemn vow."

The War Maiden remained silent for a few moments, studying Saint's graceful and fearsome figure. Then, she smiled darkly:

"...She must not have fought anyone worth fighting, then. You are her servant?"

Kai nodded.

"Indeed. I am her voice, and that creature over there is her shadow. We serve the lady."

The woman lingered for a moment, then glanced at him and raised an eyebrow.

"What is a human like you doing in the company of two Shadows?"

The archer remained silent for a few seconds, and then responded:

"A long time ago, evil people captured me and locked me in a deep, dark well. I was going to die in there of thirst and hunger, but my lady lifted the heavy grate and helped me escape, while that demon slaughtered the evildoers. I owe them a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid."

The War Maiden stared at him silently, then nodded.

"You speak with sincerity… surprising, for a man. Tell me, then… why has your lady come to our temple?"

Kai glanced at Saint and hesitated for a bit.

Sunny felt his hearts start to beat faster, as well. This was the most dangerous part of their plan... in fact, he was still not entirely sure that it was going to be a wise move. However... both of them had decided that while not very wise, this was something that would give them the best chance to succeed. Full of tense anticipation, he silently gritted his teeth.

Finally, the archer looked at the War Maiden and said, his voice calm and steady:

"...She has come to take back that which belongs to the shadows. To retrieve the death of the Ivory Lord from your hands… whether you are willing to return it, or not."

# Chapter-667: Temple of the Chalice

The Glass Knife contained the string of fate that belonged to Sevirax, the Chain Lord of the Ivory City. It was his death, which the War Maidens had received from the Saint of Shadows hundreds of years ago.

Now, two Shadows came back to retrieve it.

Sunny suspected that none of the sect members that had been alive all those centuries ago lived still, including the particular Maiden to whom Shadow Lord had sent the Glass Knife before taking his own life. As such, none would remember the four-armed demon who had delivered it… most likely.

And yet, the current disciples of the cult had to know what was being kept in their temple, and how it got there. So, there was a chance that they will just hand it over to the original owners… no matter how slim.

If not, they would allow Saint and her entourage inside, at least.

That was Sunny's hope, and judging by the fact that the Maidens did not immediately attack after hearing Kai's provocative statement, his calculations were not wrong.

The tall woman who had spoken to them grew still as soon as the Glass Knife was mentioned, a somber expression appearing on her face. She studied Saint's motionless figure, then said coldly, her raspy voice growing slightly hoarse:

"...So the day has come. How fortunate we are, to witness it! Someone finally dares to challenge the Red Sect for the ownership of the ancient relic. Who knew that I would witness this children's story

come true?"

She smiled darkly, then tilted her head, no humor in her sharp, grey eyes.

"...However, you are wrong, Shadow. The Glass Blade does not belong to you, or any of your kin. It had been entrusted to our foremother, who passed on the duty of protecting it to her wards, and through them, to us."

The woman lingered, then sighed.

"However, it is not my place… to put you in yours. Come, demoness. Let me welcome you to the Temple of the Chalice!"

With that, the War Maidens slowly lowered their weapons, and then followed their leader as she turned to walk on the path through the graveyard of swords. Surrounded by them, Saint, Sunny, and Kai had no choice but to walk forward. After a few moments, the taciturn demon gracefully jumped down from Nightmare's back, who then dissipated into shadows and returned to Sunny's soul.

Despite the fact that the beautiful female warriors had sheathed their swords, their hostility remained aimed at the three strangers, and their gazes were still as sharp and dangerous as steel blades.

'What an unfriendly bunch…'

Sunny sighed inwardly, and then looked around through his shadows, paying attention to the countless swords thrust into the ground all around them. Somehow, he felt that each of these weapons had a history… a violent story of battle and bloodshed that ended in death.

Perhaps some of these blades had once belonged to the War Maidens of the past, but most must have been wielded by those warriors slain by the members of the sect.

…There were very, very many swords thrust into the ground around the stone temple.

Soon, they approached the gates of the magnificent structure and were led inside. Sunny was somewhat familiar with the interior of the

ancient shrine, but it was hard to bring together two pictures that lived in his mind — one of a desolate ruin, the other of the austere, but formidable and perfectly maintained temple fortress.

They were ushered into a spacious entrance hall, where Saint followed his command and stopped, as though unwilling to go further.

The tall Maiden with grey eyes glanced at her and smiled coldly.

"...Wait here, demoness. I will inform the elders of your arrival. And your challenge."

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Saint stood with the blade of the Soul Serpent resting on her shoulder, motionless like a beautiful statue cut of black onyx. Her presence was aloof and indifferent, as though the three of them were not surrounded from all sides by fearsome warriors, with no way to escape.

The tall Maiden left, but the rest of the sentinels remained, surrounding them in a wide circle. Their faces were calm, but their eyes remained sharp, steady hands laying on the hilts of their swords.

Under their gazes, Sunny didn't dare to send one of his shadows to scout around the temple… however, he also didn't need to. Instead, he listened to the sounds surrounding them with curiosity.

The Temple of the Chalice seemed silent, but somewhere far away, a repeating sound could be heard… the sound of something blunt hitting flesh, over and over again, and an occasional rattle of chains. Disturbed, he frowned slightly, and then glanced at Kai.

The archer stood on the other side of Saint, his face hidden in the shadow of a deep hood. His pose seemed both polite and relaxed, however, Sunny could feel a strange tension hidden behind this casual stance.

He frowned, and then moved his hand slightly, attracting his friend's attention.

Kai lingered for a moment, then spoke in the language of the waking world without turning his head:

"...Yes, I found it."

Why would Sunny need to use his shadows to explore the temple if he had Nightingale by his side? Kai's Awakened Ability, after all, allowed him to see far and wide, and even peer through solid objects. Very few things could hide from his gaze.

So, his task was to locate one of the two things they were looking for — the Glass Knife.

And just in a few minutes, he had already succeeded.

Kai, however, did not seem too happy.

"Sunny… uh… I think we might have a slight problem."

'Damnation...'

Sunny scowled, not liking the tone of his friend's voice one bit. He turned his head slightly, glaring at the young man in the wooden mask.

The archer sighed.

"You see… in the center of the temple, there is a large hall. And in the center of that hall stands a giant stone chalice. The chalice… is filled to the brim with raging white flame. That fire is just like the fires that burn in the Sky Below. In fact, I am pretty sure that one of those orbs of divine flame is somehow contained within it."

He lingered for a moment, and then added grimly:

"The Glass Knife is on the bottom of the chalice. Right in the middle of the annihilating divine flame…"

# Chapter-668: Vessels of War

'Damn it… damn it all! Why did it have to be the divine flame, of all things?!'

The three of them were finally allowed into the central hall of the temple, where a tall chalice cut of a single slab of grey stone stood, full of blinding white fire. The hall was drowning in stark light, deep shadows, and suffocating heat… however, even that sweltering heat was too forgiving.

…This close to the orb of Sun God's flame, all of them should have been already turned to ash.

Sunny stared at the chalice with a grim expression, remembering the suffering he had gone through in the Sky Below. This was a true remnant of the obliterating pillar of white fire that had been brought down on the Kingdom of Hope by a god, and then continued to burn in the depths of the shattered land, slowly devouring it until nothing but an empty void remained.

The pale version of it that he was able to channel through the Cruel Sight was already immensely destructive, and this… this was the real deal.

How was the chalice even capable of containing the annihilating white star?

He shivered, and then glanced under the surface of the stone vessel, noticing an intricate weave of ancient runes glowing inside the grey stone. An enchantment… and a powerful one, at that. What kind of sorcerer had created it? Who had been powerful enough to contain a piece of divine fury?

…In any case, without knowing how to control the enchantment — if there even was a way to control it — getting the Glass Knife out was

not going to be easy, or maybe even impossible. Their task just grew exponentially more difficult.

'Damn it all!'

Absorbed by the dire sight of the stone chalice, Sunny didn't even notice the three women standing in front of it for a moment or two. When he did, however, his mood dropped even further.

Turned into black silhouettes by the furious white flame burning behind them, three Ascended battle masters watched the uninvited guests with eyes full of cold, cutting killing intent.

One had red hair and wielded an odachi similar to his own, its blade forged out of vibrant scarlet steel. One had black hair and held a simple spear, its shaft covered by a complicated weave of runes. One had white hair and was unarmed.

…That last one scared him the most. Solvane, too, didn't feel the need to wield a weapon. If the first two Maidens seemed like warriors of terrifying skill, the third one… the third one gave him a sensation of being something much more than that.

A true vessel of War, perhaps.

He carefully looked around the hall, remembering how it had looked in the future.

The stone slabs covering the floor had been cracked and misshapen, the mighty pillars broken and toppled over, the roof had collapsed. The walls of the hall, seemingly so strong and unassailable, had been shattered outwards, suggesting that something had detonated in the center of the hall with tremendous force.

The chalice itself had been destroyed, with only a few fragments laying on the floor in a molten pile.

…And there had been human bones littering the hall, some still covered by the remains of red silk garments, with vengeful wraiths carrying murderous fury even thousands of years after the tragedy.

Sunny glanced tensely at the dancing white flame, then shivered.

Someone had come to the Temple of the Chalice and destroyed it, slaughtering all the fearsome Maidens in the process. Had they been looking for the Glass Knife, as well? Was he going to meet that terrifying being?

Or had he, perhaps, met them already?

Two faces suddenly appeared in his mind… that of Solvane, and that of Noctis.

His thoughts were interrupted by one of the Ascended Maidens. The woman who seemed the most powerful, the fiend with white hair, looked at Saint with a cold expression and said, her voice echoing in the stark darkness of the hall:

"I've been told that you wish to retrieve the legacy of our foremothers, shadow."

Saint lingered for a moment, then moved her head slightly, nodding.

The Maiden smiled, sending chills running down Sunny's spine.

"Then your task is very simple. All you have to do is prove yourself before the Chalice. Kill me, and then my two sisters. If you do, the Glass Blade will be yours."

Saint tilted her head a little, expressing an indifferent agreement.

Sunny let out a furtive sigh of relief.

So, there was a ritual to release that Glass Knife into someone's hands, after all… a trial that those seeking it had to pass. A simple duel, or rather three consecutive ones, against the senior warriors of the ancient sect. These Ascended were truly formidable, but fighting them was better than having to face against the entire sect.

His worst expectations had not come true. As for whether or not Saint would be able to kill the three Ascended priestesses… he wasn't sure. However, there was at least a chance.

And after the leaders of the sect were dead, finding and rescuing Effie would be much easier.

As the War Maiden with white hair grew silent, another one — the woman wielding the scarlet odachi — spoke:

"...However, first, you will have to prove that you have the right to challenge us. You will fight, and kill, a disciple of each of us."

As soon as she stopped speaking, the third one said:

"...Or you will die."

Sunny hid a triumphant smile. Three Awakened warriors were not going to pose any threat to Saint, who was an Ascended Demon, and formidable well beyond her Rank and Class.

However… something felt off. He couldn't tell what at the moment, but his intuition was filling his hearts with unease.

Sunny glanced at Kai, and noticed a similar apprehensive expression in the archer's eyes. He nodded slightly, prompting the young man to step forward and bow.

"My lady accepts. However, it is unbecoming of her to slaughter your disciples, fearsome as they may be. Such a fight would not be a struggle for her, and as such, would not please the Goddess of Life, offending her in this sacred temple. If these disciples wish to challenge my lady, they will have to defeat her shadow first."

The War Maiden with white hair laughed, then took a step forward.

"So, she can only fight us after defeating our disciples, but our disciples can only fight her after defeating her pet demon? Fine… fine, let it be so! No shadow can defeat a vessel of war. He was going to die after your lady's body is torn apart, anyway. Let the creature be destroyed first!"

With that, she turned to one of the younger War Maidens and smiled darkly:

"Let us not disappoint our guests. Go, bring the feral child I have the misfortune of calling my successor here. She will atone for her transgressions today by killing these two shadows!"

Sunny was pushed forward and offered a choice of weapons. After hesitating for a few moments, he raised a fearsome greatsword with his upper hands, and took a buckler and a long dagger with the lower.

Then, he walked into the center of the hall and froze, watching the divine flames burn in the darkness.

…All things considered, things had turned out well. The Ascended War Maidens had been cunning, offering the lives of their disciples as sacrifices, no doubt in order to glean the secrets of Saint's skill before facing her.

Knowing the enemy was half the victory, after all… by remaining a mystery while observing how their opponent fights, the three battle masters would have received an advantage that Sunny couldn't allow himself to give them.

Now, however, he was going to fight and kill three of the Awakened Maidens, thus keeping Saint as mysterious as these battle masters were. Facing such fearsome opponents was not going to be easy, but he was sure of his ability to outsmart, overpower, and slaughter them.

Fighting such skilled warriors was only going to enrich his mastery of Shadow Dance. More importantly...

They were not going to have to fight against the whole sect… the chalice containing the divine flame was not going to be shattered, and the temple was not going to be turned into a ruin. Whatever it had been that had happened here in the real world would not befall Sunny and Kai, leaving them unscathed.

All he had to do was to kill three young women, one after another. They would be fearsome combatants, no doubt, especially due to the madness of Hope coursing through their veins... but he had faced far worse. Sunny felt confident in his ability.

…A few moments later, however, his black eyes narrowed.

Staring at his first opponent, Sunny couldn't help but shudder and let

out a low growl.

'...Damnation!'

# Chapter-669: Feral Child

When Sunny heard the white-haired War Maiden refer to her disciple as a feral child, he assumed that she was speaking about an especially ferocious female warrior being trained in the ancient sect of War.

…What he had not expected, however, was that his enemy would turn out to be a literal child.

'...Damnation!'

As Sunny watched with a grim expression, two of the Awakened maidens dragged a girl of about eleven, maybe twelve years of age into the hall, then threw her on the stone floor in front of him.

The girl had a scrawny, juvenile body that did not seem to have touched on the path to maturity yet. Her short, wild hair was of a vibrant red color, almost the same as the torn silk garments she wore. Her skin was pale and white… or at least, it was supposed to be.

Instead, it was blue and black, almost the same color as Sunny's own, which had been made to resemble obsidian by the embrace of his shadows. The girl had obviously been often and cruelly beaten, to the point that it was hard to notice a spot free of bruises on her once tender body.

The whites of her eyes were hidden by the cloudy red layer of blood that had burst from ruptured vessels, making the child look like an actual beast. Hitting the floor, the girl remained motionless for a few moments, then let out a long sigh and slowly stood up, lean muscles rolling under her bruised and lacerated skin.

Even though she seemed tall for her age, she was still too small to reach up to Sunny's chest.

'Curse these mad witches…'

Suddenly full of fury, he glanced at the three Ascended War Maidens with a dark expression, then looked down at the abused child in front of him.

Was this… was this whom he had to kill?

Just a few moments ago, the task seemed so easy…

The girl, meanwhile, finished picking herself from the floor and faced the War Maidens with an insolent, contemptuous expression on her bruised face. With wild flames burning in her eyes, she spat a bit of blood on the floor and then bared her teeth in a feral grin.

"...What now, you old hags? More training? Ah, and here I was just starting to enjoy my daily punishment!"

Despite the rude words and the recalcitrant tone, the girl's voice was soft and childishly high, and as the result, what she had meant to sound defiant ended up sounding comical instead. Flustered by that, she gritted her teeth, and then proceeded to make a rude gesture with her hand, as if to better articulate her point.

Sunny's heart suddenly grew cold. He flinched slightly, his pupils widening in shock.

'No… no, no, no…'

He was already torn about the fact that he would have to kill a child — and this was going to be a battle to the death, whether he wanted to or not. The War Maidens had made it abundantly clear. Showing mercy would be the same as admitting defeat, thus surrendering both his own life and that of Kai to their slaughter.

But when the girl spoke, things took a turn from bad to worse.

Because even if he had not recognized that tone… which he instantly did… Sunny was pretty sure that the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Hope were not in the habit of expressing their meaning with their middle fingers. That was a thing humans in the waking world did.

Which left only one possibility.

The feral child in front of him…

Was Effie.

'Goddammit!'

Now, there was no chance at all that he would kill his opponent and follow the ritual set for them by the Maidens. All that stuff about not having to fight the entire sect he had felt relieved about a few minutes ago? Any possibility of that was basically gone!

How were they going to get out of this one?!

He gritted his teeth, a low growl escaping through them. Hearing it, the senior War Maiden smiled coldly, and then stared at Effie:

"No training today, insolent child. Instead, a test. We have guests today, you see… kill them, and I might order your older sisters to feed you today. You have been demanding food, have you not?"

At the mention of food, a somber expression appeared on the girl's bruised face. She hesitated for a moment, and then turned around, searching for these guests she was supposed to kill.

Because of how the hall was lit, the figures of everyone who stood near the entrance and along the walls — Saint, Kai, and dozens of War Maidens who were here to witness the challenge — appeared as dark silhouettes. The only one whom she could clearly see was Sunny.

Effie stared at his abdomen for a few moments, confused. Then, she slowly craned her neck, looking higher, and higher, and then higher still. Her face gradually grew paler and paler, until a hint of fear appeared in her eyes.

"Whoa… hey there, big guy…"

She shivered, then glanced back at her teacher.

"Are you joking? I am supposed to kill that monster?!"

The War Maiden shook her head.

"Not a monster. A demon. Why… are you not hungry?"

Effie lingered for a few moments, then asked in a little voice:

"Do I get any weapons, at least?"

The white-haired warrior chuckled cruelly.

"Your fists should be enough. Use your tongue if they're not… it has been sharper than a blade lately, after all."

The scrawny girl grimaced, then sighed and clenched her fist, turning to Sunny with hunger and resentment mixing in the bright eyes. Her soft voice resounded in the hall, full of reluctant determination:

"...Alright then… let's kill a demon… ah, the things a girl must do to earn a dinner…"

Sunny lowered his sword, staring at her with furious intent.

'You idiot! It's me! Are you going to recognize me or not?!'

A weave of runes suddenly ignited on the stone floor of the hall, creating a circle around them. There was some sort of a barrier preventing either from escaping now, and outsiders from offering them help… the only ones left inside were Sunny, Effie, and the three War Maidens standing in front of the chalice.

Sunny hissed, trying to get the child to look at him.

'Crap… the emerald amulet, I better get it right now...'

He released the hilt of the greatsword with one hand, intending to use it to fish out the amulet from the folds of his kimono.

'If Effie doesn't recognize me, I'll have to really fight her until I come up with a plan… luckily, she is just an Awakened. With my three cores and shadow augmentation, it should not be too…'

Before he could finish the thought, however, the scrawny girl suddenly lunged forward with shocking speed and struck him in the abdomen with her tiny fist.

…The towering four-armed demon folded like a piece of paper, spat a torrent of blood, and was thrown a dozen meters back like a weightless doll.

Crashing into a stone pillar, he sent a net of cracks running through its grey surface and then rolled down to the floor.

Stunned by the tremendous, ridiculous force of that single blow, Sunny tried to push air into his four empty lungs and stared at the little girl with dread.

'...Right. That is Effie, alright. Curses!'

# Chapter-670: With Kid Gloves

Because of Effie's easygoing personality and affable attitude, it was easy to forget just how fearsome of a warrior she was.

Out of all the members of the cohort, she had survived on the Forgotten Shore the longest… she had done so while hunting down Nightmare Creatures on the cursed streets of the Dark City all alone, as well. Mostly because anyone willing to help her would have been disposed of by the ruler of the Bright Castle, who had been scorned by her rejection.

The fact that the young huntress had never bowed to his demands despite the black mark placed on her only went to show how unyielding her will really was.

Her Aspect made Effie a perfect instrument of war. While not as drastic as the dire but narrow speed augmentation Caster had possessed, it was still great and wondrous. More importantly, it was an all-around enhancement — speed, strength, agility, endurance, resilience… every facet of her physicality was elevated to an inhuman level.

Sunny knew of her abilities better than most, since Effie had taught him how to wield a spear. However, due to the fact that their lessons had taken place in the real world, where the huntress was bound to a wheelchair, he never experienced her full strength in a fight himself.

Until now.

'Crap… that really hurt…'

Before, Sunny had hoped that their strength would be more or less equal, considering that he was augmented by three shadows. However, it was not even close… that one blow almost shattered his body into pieces. That was only made more bizarre by the fact that it

had been delivered by a scrawny child.

Maybe if he had an additional shadow, or two...

Sunny had become much more powerful, but Effie had grown much stronger after the Forgotten Shore, as well. Her core was now fully saturated… more than that, while Sunny had been surviving in the Red Colosseum, she had survived a hell of her own, it seemed.

Being tortured, taught, and tempered by the cult that had created Solvane, of all people.

Sunny spat some blood, gritted his teeth, and slowly stood up.

'This is… not good…'

The little girl glanced at him with surprise and tilted her head a little.

"Huh… still alive? Damn… tough bastard…"

He thought of taking out the emerald amulet once again, but Effie gave him no time. A split second later, she was already upon him, her leg flying through the air toward his ribcage.

Sunny had no time to think about anything. He didn't want to hurt his friend, but he also didn't want to die. And getting hit by this bruised, wild, monstrous girl was going to kill him soon enough, no doubt…

'I need to slow her down.'

Even if his ribs survived Effie's wicked kick due to Bone Weave, the organs protected by them were not that resilient. The shock would surely rupture something important…

Gritting his teeth, Sunny thrust one of his lower hands forward, putting the sharp blade of the dagger in the path of Effie's small, bony, and bruised leg. She was going to have to rethink that attack or risk having her calf cut wide open.

Unless… she was using her second Aspect Ability, of course.

'Curse it a…'

The dagger slid off the girl's skin without leaving even a scratch on it, as though it was made out of tempered steel. Luckily, Sunny had expected this outcome and was already dodging out of the way.

Effie's shin hit the pillar instead of his side, sending a rain of large stone chunks and sharp shards flying through the air. Before Sunny could regain his balance, the next attack came… and then the next, and the next, and the next…

Unable to seriously hurt the girl, he had no choice but to retreat under the onslaught of deadly strikes, receiving several glancing blows that left him reeling and in pain. The scrawny girl was very small, but made up for it by being incredibly nimble and swift. The little imp was so wily and fast, in fact, that it almost felt as though she was in several places at the same time.

"Stop running, big guy! Let us… let us finish this quickly… I am hella hungry, you know!"

'Argh… would you slow down for a second, you devil child!'

Sunny growled with unrestrained fury and brought the greatsword down, creating some space between himself and the advancing girl. He felt very, very... very frustrated.

All he had to do, for now, was to let Effie know who he was. That was not very hard to do… there were many ways, really. He could use one of his shadows, or summon a familiar Memory… if only she gave him a damned moment to breathe and think!

The problem was that Effie did not. She was also not fighting in any style Sunny was familiar with. He knew her usual technique pretty well, but this assault had nothing in common with it. In fact, her current ferocious style was leagues beyond what the huntress had been capable of in the past, both in terms of purpose and lethality.

It was sort of… breathtaking. Even when performed by a scrawny child.

A Memory… a Memory was the easiest option, since summoning one

took only a thought and several seconds. However, that was also the worst option, because doing so would reveal his ability to summon things out of thin air to the Maidens. He and Kai had not gone through the trouble of appearing unarmed just to give that advantage away immediately.

'Think, you fool!'

There had to be a better way...

Sunny deflected another devastating kick and took a step back, then froze for a split second… and threw his buckler away.

The thing was hideously bent by now, anyway.

With one of his hands now free, he made it into a fist, sent it flying forward…

And extended his middle finger with a vicious snarl.

Effie, who was already preparing to launch another attack, blinked a couple of times, then looked up at the towering demon with confusion.

"...Huh?"

'Finally!'

Using Effie's momentary confusion, Sunny lowered his hand and mimed grabbing the rim of a wheel and moving it forward and backward, as if pushing a wheelchair.

The little girl frowned, then lunged forward and delivered a crushing strike, but this time, her movements were a bit slower, allowing him to easily dodge out of the way... purposefully so.

Making sure that Effie could see his hand, he attacked with the greatsword while simultaneously making a fist again and pretending to have an arm wrestling match with an invisible opponent.

The little girl swatted the sword away with her naked forearm, and then, her bloodred eyes suddenly widened.

She craned her neck and stared at the towering demon with an inexorable expression, then blurted out in a soft, childish voice:

"D—doofus?!"

'Thank god... took you long enough.'

Sunny pretended to attack her with the dagger, then dodged a similarly half-hearted kick, and gave the little girl a short nod.

Effie's face trembled, and then, she whispered:

"Why… why the Spell are you so damn tall?!"

# Chapter-671: Thunderstruck

Sunny stared at the little girl, trying not to lose his composure.

'...What is wrong with these people?'

He had two horns, a mouth full of sharp fangs, long claws, and four damned arms… and yet, the first thing that both Effie and Kai had reacted to was his height. Was he not allowed to be tall, for once?!

Continuing to pretend to fight the monstrous child in earnest, he pointed to his chest instead of an answer. Effie, too, slowed down her relentless assault a bit — just enough to give him some breathing room without making her changed attitude obvious.

A few moments later, when they were close to each other, she hissed quietly:

"Let me guess, you saw the message I left that said to not come to the Temple of Chalice… and, naturally, decided to do the exact opposite."

Sunny spun, avoiding her fist, and raised two fingers.

The girl frowned.

"Two… someone else is with you? Cassie? Kai? Ah, it's Kai… so, both of you decided to ignore my warning!"

She deflected his dagger to the side, grimaced when it slid over a barely healed laceration on her forearm, and then squeaked in her childish voice:

"Well… good! I, uh… I might have been too full of myself, thinking that I would be able to actually escape this damned place. So... I am really, really glad that you came…"

Sunny thrust his greatsword forward, narrowly missing the girl's

head, and then let out a low growl.

Effie gritted her teeth.

"But, Sunny… we have two problems. One is that these lunatics never let their disciples leave the sect alive. The second… the second is that if one of us doesn't kill the other in this duel, my teachers are going to kill us both… so…"

She caught his sword with one hand, then brought her fist on its blade, shattering it and making Sunny stumble.

"...so I hope that you have a plan! No, I know you do! Don't you?"

Despite how beaten and bruised the girl was, her soft voice sounded optimistic and cheerful. Knowing that Effie was confident in his ability to get them both out of this dire situation alive, somehow, Sunny felt very validated.

…The problem was that he did not have a plan. In fact, he didn't have the slightest idea about how to survive this mess.

Yet.

So, he simply shook his head, making Effie pale and grow silent.

As they continued to fight, Sunny thought feverishly. He didn't see any chance of escaping the Temple of the Chalice without a bloody battle against the War Maidens, as well as any way for the three of them to come up on top in that battle.

Effie was strong and fearsome, but she was not Solvane. She would not have been able to fight her way out of the sect as that fiend had. With Kai and Sunny added into the equation, however…

Things still didn't look too good.

Out of the three, Sunny was the powerhouse. Even though his physical might was lesser than that of the huntress, overall, he was a much, much deadlier creature. Added to that were his three Shadows, two of which were Ascended Demons, while the third was an Awakened Terror.

Sunny alone was most likely enough to contain two out of the three senior War Maidens, at least. Effie would have to handle the third one… which would leave Kai alone against dozens of Awakened warriors gathered in the hall. That wouldn't work. No matter how Sunny moved the elements of the theoretical battle, nothing gave them a good chance of escaping alive.

However, there had to be a way… the War Maidens had been defeated in the future, after all, so they were not invincible…

Thinking of the future, he hesitated for a moment, and then glanced at the massive stone chalice towering in the center of the hall, full of furious white flame. Unlike in the future, it was still whole and imposing, the complex enchantment that permeated the ancient stone holding the mass of divine fire contained inside.

His face grew dim.

'I don't like this idea… no, I don't like it at all…'

Indeed, he was not happy with the seed of a plan that suddenly appeared in his mind. Not only because it would be extremely dangerous and hard to pull off, but also because going through with it had broader, far-reaching implications he didn't want to think about.

But no matter how hard Sunny thought, he couldn't come up with anything else to do. If moving the elements did not work, the only way to achieve his goal was to change them.

With a deep sigh, he concentrated for a few moments, and then gestured Effie to keep close.

At the same time, several things happened.

Outside of the circle of runes, Saint lowered the Soul Serpent and then outstretched one hand, which suddenly became shrouded in a swarm of white sparks. She took a small step to the side to shield Kai with her body. Both actions caused the War Maidens surrounding them to grow tense, their hands gripping the hilts of their weapons.

Within the circle, Sunny had become surrounded by countless onyx

threads that ensnared his body. One of his four hands was enveloped by a swarm of scarlet sparks, one in a black fog, and the other two in a swirling mass of dancing sparks of white light.

The three senior Maidens overseeing the fight frowned when they saw the four-armed demon undergo a strange transmutation. Although just a little, their stances shifted, revealing their readiness to intervene should a need arise.

But they didn't move yet, reluctant to intrude upon the duel without an undeniable reason.

A few seconds later, a kite shield forged out of dull steel appeared on Saint's arm, while the odachi she held silently slid into the shadows. Sunny was suddenly clad in intricate onyx armor, holding a somber spear in one of his lower hands and an austere tachi in another.

Finally, a black bow with a scarlet string and a strange arrow that seemed to be made out of a bolt of lightning appeared in his upper hands.

[Patient Avenger], [Cruel Sight], [Midnight Shard], [Morgan's Warbow], [Strike of Thunder]... and [Mantle of the Underworld] augmented by [Memory of Fire].

He had summoned all these Memories at the same time, knowing that he might not have a chance to do so later.

…And there was one last Memory that he had called upon.

As the light around him suddenly dimmed, the shape of a small black lantern started to manifest itself in the air.

Spinning around before the senior War Maidens reacted, Sunny nocked the Strike of Thunder on the string of his bow. Then, he poured a massive flood of essence into the bow and drew it, activating the [Death Dealer] enchantment.

…[Unbending] Enchantments Description: "This adamantine bow demands a giant's might to be bent. Because of that, arrows shot from it travel as far as the eye can see, and strike with terrible strength, piercing both armor and flesh."

[Death Dealer] Enchantment Description: "This bow is able to consume a large amount of essence to deliver an obliterating strike."

And, finally:

[Caged Lightning] Enchantment Description: [This arrow strikes as fast as a bolt of lightning, and chains its devastating damage to several nearby creatures.]

Feeling his reserves of essence instantly diminish by a vast amount, Sunny gritted his teeth and released the string. At the last moment, all three of his shadow slid off his fingers and wrapped themselves around the Strike of Thunder.

And so, this Ascended arrow of the Second Tier was sent flying from an Ascended bow of the Fourth Tier, its power augmented manyfold by the three shadows and the obliterating influence of the [Death Dealer] enchantment.

A shot like that… would probably be enough to kill a Master. The arrow was too fast to be intercepted, as well.

However, Sunny had not aimed at any of the three senior War Maidens.

Instead, he aimed his arrow... at the stone chalice. And not anywhere on it, at that. No, he sent the Strike of Thunder at the exact spot on the ancient stone surface where the weave of invisible runes was the most intense and elaborate.

Sunny doubted that even this combination of powers and enchantments would be enough to deal real damage to the stone vessel. However, if he could destroy a small, but important part of its enchantment… the divine flame contained within would do the rest.

…As the bolt of lightning streaked through the air toward the chalice, he grabbed the little girl and dashed behind one of the columns, then knelt and hugged her with all four arms, covering her little body with his.

At the same time, Saint pushed Kai back and raised her shield, covering them both.

Before anyone could react, the furious lightning struck the side of the giant stone chalice…

And then, everything became white.

# Chapter-672: Shadow Cohort

The bolt of darkness-wreathed lightning shot between two of the senior War Maidens and struck the side of the stone chalice. A flash of light drowned the hall for a split second, and almost instantly, three arcs of electricity tore through the air, traveling back to strike the sect leaders.

Since there was no one else near them, the lightning did not chain further, spending all its might while coursing through the bodies of the Ascended warriors…

Sunny did not see any of that, however, because he was already dashing toward a wide stone pillar with Effie's scrawny figure held in his arms…

Behind him, a single narrow crack appeared on the surface of the chalice.

…And through it, a furious white light suddenly shone.

A moment later, countless fractures appeared on the ancient stone, and then, everything became white.

"Argh!"

Sunny was on his knees behind the column, his back to the center of the hall, hugging Effie with all his four arms. His vision was gone, replaced by an endless field of flawless white, and so was his hearing. He felt a shockwave go through his body, and the pillar behind him shatter, turning into a rain of broken, melting stone. Then, a flash of agony pierced his soul.

Everything was enveloped by terrifying, suffocating heat. He felt it wash over him like a wave, and prayed that they would survive its immolating embrace.

He had a reason to believe that they would. In the future, there had been bones littering the floor of the hall, after all. That meant that when the real chalice exploded, not everyone around it had been turned to ash.

Sunny also had the [Stalwart] enchantment of the Mantle of the Underworld providing him with high resistance to elemental attacks, as well as the [Underworld Armament] enchantment channeling and enhancing the protective effect of the Memory of Fire through the onyx armor.

That was not going to be enough to withstand divine flame itself, but could save him — and Effie, whom he was shielding with his towering body — from the heat produced by the flame.

A few moments later, the white field veiling his sight suddenly dimmed, and gave way to beautiful darkness. The Shadow Lantern was devouring the light surrounding its master, uncaring for what had produced it.

After a couple more seconds, Sunny was finally able to discern the shape of his surroundings.

The sight of the great hall… was all too familiar.

The stone chalice lay in a molten pile on the stone floor, which was cracked and shattered. Most of the pillars supporting the roof had toppled, and so did a section of the roof itself, revealing a piece of the night sky, with stars shining on its black canvas.

The walls of the hall were fractured and had collapsed outward… just like they would be in the future.

All over the devastated chamber, small pieces of the divine flame burned. Some danced on shards of stone, slowly devouring them, some on the charred corpses of those War Maidens that had been killed in the blast. However, the flames did not seem to be spreading… strangely, there were numerous runes shining on what remained of the hall's floor and ceiling, weakening them.

…Perhaps because of those runes, many of the War Maidens

survived.

'Curse it…'

The three Ascended were all alive, although two of the three were severely wounded - whether by the lightning of the Strike of Thunder, the explosion, or the divine flame, Sunny did not know. Some of their Awakened disciples had survived, as well, and were now slowly rising from the ground, shock and fury written on their pale faces.

And Sunny was alive, too.

But not unscathed.

His body was not damaged, but one of his shadows seemed to have been too slow to retreat from the chalice and had gotten itself burned a little by the divine flame. Since the three shadows were manifestations of his soul, it was burned, as well.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny endured the pain and rose to his feet.

Soul damage… well, what else was new?

Just as he thought that, the shadows slid between the dancing flames and attached themselves to his feet, one cradling its damaged arm with three hands.

Effie looked around with shock, sweat rolling down her little face.

"The hell… happened… you c—crazy…"

She spoke and instantly regretted it when a torrent of scorchingly hot air streamed into her mouth.

Sunny evaluated the situation, then pushed the little girl away, gesturing at the far end of the hall. There, Kai was levitating above the floor, his hood torn and his wooden mask glowing angrily, as if seconds from catching on fire. The young man was surrounded by a whirlwind of white sparks, no doubt summoning his armor and weapons.

…He was also surrounded by a dozen surviving War Maidens.

Effie's eyes widened, and she took a step in his direction, but then hesitated and looked at Sunny with concern.

"...What about the Masters?!"

He glanced at the three Ascended warriors, and then simply pointed a finger at himself.

The little girl wanted to say something, her eyes full of worry and unease, but then nodded and dashed away, summoning her own Memories.

Left alone, Sunny dismissed Morgan's Warbow, transferred the Cruel Sight to his upper hands, and slowly walked toward the fearsome battle masters.

Three shadows followed him, and whenever he passed, the light was destroyed and replaced by darkness.

The four-armed demon in onyx armor stopped a dozen or so meters away from the leaders of the Red Sect and tilted his head a little, staring at them with his black eyes.

The white-haired Ascended — the only one who remained unscathed after the explosion — looked at him with cold hatred, then smiled wildly and spat:

"Foul shadow… you dare challenge the three of us alone?"

The Maiden with red hair gritted her teeth and moved her badly burned arm, raising the scarlet odachi into a battle-ready position. The one with black hair leaned heavily on her spear, then whispered something, causing the runes on the weapon to ignite with an angry red glow.

Sunny remained motionless for a second, then shook his head.

And grinned, revealing his sharp fangs.

…A moment later, three terrifying creatures burst from his shadows,

fury burning in their eyes. One was a giant serpent with obsidian scales, one was a dreadful black steed with adamantine horns and fangs like those of a wolf, and the third one was a graceful knight in onyx armor, wielding a charred kite shield and a stone sword.

Together, the four Shadows lunged forward.

# Chapter-673: War Masters

An Awakened had no business fighting one Ascended... let alone three, each radiating an aura of an aberrant battle master. But then again, as far as Awakened went, Sunny was more than a little abnormal himself.

He had already killed two Masters before: Pierce, one of the wardens of the Night Temple, and the fearsome Red Priest, the slave overseer of the Colosseum. Both victories had been won by the skin of his teeth and cost him dearly… Sunny had even lost his head in one of those battles.

The War Maidens seemed far more daunting than both of those men, and there were three of them. The previous clashes with the Ascended he had were nothing compared to the dire challenge of this one.

…However, during both of those fights, Sunny hadn't had the opportunity to go full out. The first time, Saint and Serpent had been preoccupied with the human Echoes. The second time, he had been cut off from the Spell, and thus from his arsenal of Memories. But this time…

This time, nothing was preventing Sunny from unleashing the full and dreadful power of his Divine Aspect. It was time to show what he was truly capable of when nothing held him back.

Fortunately, two of the War Maidens had already been injured by Sunny's treacherous attack. So, although attacking the three of them alone seemed more than a little bit insane, there was a good chance that he would win this fight.

…As the three Ascended prepared to deflect the assault of Shadows, Saint lowered her shoulder, put it behind the Patient Avenger, and aimed the charred kite shield at the enemies.

[Burning Heart] Enchantment Description: "This shield can store a portion of fire damage it receives to augment another weapon of its wielder or unleash a devastating shockwave."

A deep metallic groan resounded from within the shield, and then, an invisible shockwave exploded outward from its dull steel surface.

The Patient Avenger had absorbed plenty of fire damage during the explosion of divine flames, and now, all that furious force was released forward, shattering the chunks of stone that littered the cracked floor into dust and sending the War Masters flying back, into different directions.

Whatever chance of a coordinated defense they had before was now utterly gone.

Without slowing down, Sunny and his Shadows split. The Soul Serpent slithered between the dancing flames, lunging at the Maiden that wielded a spear. Saint ran toward the Maiden that wielded an odachi. And finally, Sunny and Nightmare flew toward the Maiden that was unarmed, but radiated the most pressure.

'Come on!'

Everything was going according to plan... however, no plan ever survived a clash with reality. A moment later, something unexpected happened, putting a wrinkle into Sunny's stratagem.

The woman with black hair twisted in the air and gracefully landed on her feet, plunging the tip of her glowing spear into the stone floor to stop herself from sliding back, into the white wall of divine flame burning behind her. And then… there were suddenly two of her.

Two identical War Maidens jumped to their feet, each holding an identical glowing spear. None looked like an illusion, and both possessed real shadows. Both were made of flesh and bone. Which meant... that the threat she posed instantly doubled.

'What kind of an insane Aspect is that?!'

Sunny bared his fangs, changing the plan on the fly.

Nightmare pivoted and switched direction, aiming to join Soul Serpent and help it destroy the two spear-wielding Ascended. One of the shadows cast by Sunny swiftly glided forward, wrapping itself around the black steed. The other two rose and embraced Sunny himself, since he was now facing the most fearsome of the War Masters alone.

Saint was going to have to deal with her own opponent without any augmentations. He wasn't too worried, though… out of the four of them, she was probably the most powerful.

A moment later, the War Maidens and the Shadows clashed.

To Sunny's left, Nightmare and the Soul Serpent attacked the two identical black-haired women. Now that the shadow steed was apart from Sunny and outside the area where the Shadow Lantern was devouring all light, the effect of the [Dark Destrier] Attribute was lessened, depriving him of its augmentation. However, the [Dreadlord] Attribute was still working.

No matter how confident and fearsome the War Maidens appeared, they had to be in the throes of fear and confusion deep down in their hearts. After all, their sacred chalice had just been unexpectedly destroyed, and scores of their sisters had been killed in the explosion.

Added to Nightmare's [Mantle of Fear] Ability, even powerful Ascended like them would not be able to resist the creeping terror… and the more terrified they were, the more powerful the black courser would become.

So, Sunny was not worried about Serpent and Nightmare, either.

To his right, Saint clashed with the red-haired Ascended, their blades crossing with melodious ringing. The War Maiden pushed, causing the taciturn demon to stagger and make a quick step back. Considering how much the living statue weighed, this must have taken tremendous strength… so, this one possessed some sort of a physical augmentation Aspect.

Her terrible burns seemed to be healing with incredible speed, too, which meant that the Aspect gifted her with a miraculous

regeneration rate, as well. And lastly, there was a deep nick left on the blade of Saint's stone sword… either the enchantments of the scarlet odachi were especially powerful, or the woman possessed an Ability capable of reinforcing her weapons, too.

Still, Sunny was confident that his silent Shadow would be able to win.

The only member of their team he was somewhat worried about… was himself.

Raising the Cruel Sight above his left shoulder and lowering the Midnight Shard to his right thigh, Sunny lunged at the white-haired War Maiden, who was still calm, entirely unscathed, and unarmed.

'Let's see what kind of a fiend you are, then…'

Looking at the attacking demon with cold hatred, the woman simply outstretched her empty hands…

And in the next moment, the stone shards and the dancing flames around them suddenly moved.

# Chapter-674: Mercy of Shadow

'What the…'

The shards of stone and the dancing flames moved, flying through the air toward the tall woman. Instead of crushing and burning her, however, they somehow assembled around her slender body, the pieces of stone levitating around it to form a strange armor, the fire shrouding her hands like incandescent gloves.

Sunny suddenly felt a deep, dangerous sense of unease.

"How dare you, vile shadow…"

The voice of the War Maiden thundered in the darkness that the Shadow Lantern had created, and then, two furious white eyes ignited in its depths, piercing Sunny with a murderous gaze.

"How dare you challenge War…"

A split second later, the Maiden disappeared from where she stood, the stone slab beneath her feet exploding into a rain of shards. Almost instantly, she was already upon him, a flame-wreathed palm shooting forward to pierce his chest.

'Damnation… what is it with women of War always going straight for my heart? This is already the third time this has happened!'

Sunny awkwardly blocked the devastating blow, and felt himself being thrown back by the terrifying force of the impact. Luckily, the Mantle of the Underworld had withstood the touch of the divine flames that shrouded his enemy's hands, if just barely, the enhanced enchantment of Memory of Fire still coursing through its polished onyx.

'Argh!'

Something wasn't right here… even for a Master, the speed and strength of this woman were way too terrifying. With three cores nearing full saturation and augmented with two shadows, he was supposed to be near the realm of the Ascended, at least, if not more or less on par with some of them. And yet, her might was far greater than his.

That could have been explained by possessing an Aspect that augmented one's physicality, but as Sunny had just seen, the white-haired War Maiden seemed to be some sort of an elemental sorceress.

'Ah… I see how it is…'

Crashing onto the floor in a roll, he instantly threw the Cruel Sight forward to prevent his enemy from chaining the next attack after the first, and then slashed at her with the Midnight Shard.

The blade of the austere tachi scraped fruitlessly across the carapace of levitating stone shards surrounding the War Maiden's body.

It seemed that the effect of her Aspect was broader than just elemental control. Not only was the fearsome leader of the Red Sect capable of manipulating the elements, she also drew power from them. The stone probably enhanced her strength and endurance. The fire… her speed? Attack power?

Whatever it was, it seemed to also allow the white-haired Maiden to perceive her surroundings despite the veil of shadows his lantern was creating around them.

With a ruthless scowl on her beautiful face, the woman easily swatted both the Cruel Sight and the Midnight Shard to the sides.

…However, she failed to defend against the sharp blade of the ghostly stiletto that suddenly appeared in one of Sunny's hands and slid between the chunks of stone protecting her body. The Moonlight Shard bit into the Maiden's body, failing to sink deep, but still drawing blood.

Sunny grinned. There was a benefit to having four arms, after all.

'Not so high and mighty now, are you…'

The Maiden seemed more infuriated than hurt, though. The stone carapace swirled around her, sending the Moonlight Shard flying away from his hand, and then two incandescent fists descended upon him. A spark of flame traveled through the whirlwind of stone shards and licked her body, perfectly cauterizing the wound.

'Bad…'

The white-haired warrior and Sunny clashed, their speed and ferocity causing more destruction to befall the devastated hall of the temple. Since they were shrouded by a rolling cloud of darkness, no one would have been able to see what was happening under the veil of shadows, noticing only flashes of white radiance that tore through it from time to time.

All they would be able to perceive were the furious sounds of a frightening, inhuman battle.

The War Maiden was faster and stronger than Sunny. Her Aspect was fearsome, and her skill was unlike anything he had ever seen. It was different from how humans of the waking world fought, but in no way inferior… in fact, her murderous technique was utterly sublime in its deadly power, stark perfection, and lethal precision.

She was also able to control the flow of essence through her body with such an intricate and ingenious measure of control that it made Sunny realize how crude and clumsy his own, which he had been proud of before, really was. His essence was running low, too, because of how much he had spent on delivering the obliterating shot from Morgan's Warbow.

However, he was not defenseless in that fight. While the War Maiden possessed a sublime technique, Sunny possessed a myriad of them. He was able to shift from one style to another effortlessly, dancing like a shapeless shadow, making it difficult to predict and prevent his next move.

The Cruel Sight danced with him, swiftly changing its form from a somber spear to a mirror sword and jumping between his four hands — Sunny had dismissed the Midnight Shard, knowing that it would not be able to withstand the immolating heat of divine flames

shrouding his enemy's arms.

He relied on his versatility and deception to keep himself alive under the ferocious assault of the monstrous Ascended… and through all of it, he was observing how she moved, how her shadow moved, how they fought, how they reacted…

Shadow Dance was slowly absorbing the War Maidens's sublime battle style, thus making her incredible technique more transparent and predictable. The process was helped by the fact that Sunny had recognized the same foundation in it that he had witnessed when Effie attacked him earlier… the two were a master and a pupil, after all.

For now, Sunny was locked into a desperate defense, with no hope of launching an effective attack of his own. It seemed as though his death was only a matter of time… but in reality, he was just biding his time, waiting for the right moment to deliver a single, but singularly inescapable strike.

And soon enough, that moment came.

Sunny was battered and beaten, the onyx surface of the Mantle of the Underworld cracked and glowing orange in several places, as if on the verge of melting. His reserves of essence were almost empty, and his breathing was labored and arduous. One of his horns was broken, or rather cut cleanly, the edges turned glossy and black by the indescribable heat of the War Maiden's fiery palm.

But then, he suddenly saw it. An opportunity…

There was probably not going to be another one of those in this dire fight.

As the white-haired warrior raised her hand to deliver another terrible strike, he suddenly turned the blade of the Cruel Sight slightly, so that it faced the enemy with the flat side.

And then, Sunny activated the [Light Eater] enchantment of the somber spear, turning its blade into a source of bright, radiant sunlight.

The War Maiden had used her Aspect to adjust her eyes to the darkness. And for that reason, a sudden flash of daylight blinded her, while Sunny remained unaffected by it. He was relying on his shadow sense to move around, anyway.

His enemy was only blinded for a second… but in the battle at their level, one second might as well have been an eternity.

Simply losing her sight would not have made the War Maiden defenseless, of course. A warrior like her would have been taught how to fight with her eyes closed. And indeed, she instantly shifted her body and moved her hands, preparing to deflect the most probable attacks.

Unfortunately for her, Sunny had already gained enough insight into her style to know exactly what these movements would be. And so, he knew how to slip through them.

One of his hands suddenly shot forward, the clawed gauntlet shattering a piece of stone protecting the woman's neck. The other followed, passing through the momentary gap in the magical carapace… and ripping her throat apart.

A strange sound escaped from the War Maidens's lips. Her eyes widened, the white radiance burning in them growing dimmer. For some reason, Sunny felt himself be disturbed by that sight.

The whirlwind of stone shards surrounding the Maiden's powerful body rained to the ground.

"C—can't… can't be… a shadow…"

With that, the fearsome leader of the Red Sect fell to her knees, life draining through the terrible wound on her neck.

…All it took to kill her was one calculated, treacherous strike.

Before the Spell spoke, Sunny hesitated for a moment, then reached into a breach in his armor, grasped the emerald amulet, and leaned down, whispering:

"Find peace within me. This... is the mercy of Shadow."

# Chapter-675: Devastation

A few moments later after Sunny spoke, the Spell whispered into his ear:

[You have slain an Ascended human, War Maiden Hilde.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

He took a step back and grunted, pain and exhaustion permeating his battered body.

"Why don't I feel happy…"

Sunny did not mean to say those words aloud. With a frown, he pulled his gaze away from the corpse of the valiant maiden, briefly glanced at the emerald amulet grasped in one of his hands, and hid it back under the cracked breastplate of the Mantle of the Underworld.

It was not every day that he achieved a victory in a battle against an Ascended. He should have been celebrating… but really, Sunny was not too fond of killing humans.

…At least those whom he did not hate.

Feeling pain travel through his scorched body and observing the sorry state of the Mantle, he activated its [Living Stone] enchantment and saw the stonelike metal start to restore itself. He also sensed most of his remaining essence flow through the armor, disappearing as it empowered the process.

With a sigh, Sunny leaned on the Cruel Sight and looked around warily. He was not in the best shape, and the battle was not over. It wasn't time to celebrate yet.

To his right, Saint was entangled with the red-haired Ascended, their

weapons weaving a fearsome pattern of destruction across the remains of the great hall. The Patient Avenger was glowing with an angry orange radiance, and her stone sword was surrounded with flames — augmented by the [Cold Steel] enchantment of the shield, it was somehow resisting the scarlet odachi.

However, the blade of the sword was covered by numerous nicks and cracks, as if it was seconds away from falling apart. The body of the War Maiden, meanwhile, was washed in blood but free of any wound, betraying the fact that she had been able to heal all the damage dealt to her by Saint.

To his left, Serpent and Nightmare were fighting the two identical Ascendeds. One, surprisingly, was already on the floor, the black steed stomping viciously on her chest with adamantine hooves. The sight of it was both disturbing and frightening, even though Sunny knew that the dreadful horse was on his side.

The second maiden was entangled in a furious battle with Soul Serpent, her enchanted spear flashing through the air and leaving deep gashes on the stygian scales of the giant snake.

Despite Serpent's advantage in size and might, the woman was too swift, cunning, and skilled to allow herself to be caught by its coils. What's worse, her weapon seemed to be able to follow the enemy into the shadows, striking at Serpent even when it dove into them to ensnare her.

The black-haired warrior was truly terrifying. To be able to resist both an Ascended Demon and an Awakened Terror at the same time, even after being damaged by the Strike of Thunder and the explosion of the chalice was something only the most fearsome Masters of the waking world would have been able to do… if any.

However, her luck had run out.

Because today, she met Sunny.

Stepping through the shadows, he appeared behind the maiden and struck her in the back, not at all concerned with how cowardly and dishonorable such an attack was… or would have been considered by

some people, rather.

Honor was for fools… and while Sunny knew himself to behave like a fool on occasion, he was at least immune to this particular kind of foolishness.

The blade of the Cruel Sight pierced the heart of the brave War Maiden and flashed with white incandescence of divine flames for a split second, dealing devastating damage to everything it touched. The woman died instantly, without even realizing who had killed her.

At the same time, her second copy finally succumbed to Nightmare's hooves and stopped moving, her body a terrifying mess of torn flesh and broken bones. A moment later, it shimmered with a dark red glow, and disappeared.

The Spell spoke:

[You have slain an Ascended human, War Maiden Gvenravyr.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

'One more left…'

Regretting his decision to not let the Serpent finish off the Ascended, thus replenishing his now empty reserves of essence, Sunny gritted his teeth and turned his head to glance at Saint…

However, at that moment, the voice of the Spell suddenly resounded once again:

[You have slain an Ascended human, War Maiden Kara.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

…What he saw was the War Maiden's decapitated body toppling to the floor, the taciturn knight standing above it with a shattered sword in her hand. The length of its stone blade — what remained of it, at least — was painted crimson, heavy drops falling down from it.

Saint remained motionless for a few moments, then glanced at her broken sword with regret. Her shoulders moved slightly, as if the

Shadow sighed. Dropping the shattered blade, she then bent down and nonchalantly picked up the scarlet odachi that slipped from the Ascended's fingers.

Finally, the taciturn demon brandished the odachi and turned around to look in the direction of the entrance to the great hall.

'What is she looking at…'

Sunny frowned, then suddenly shivered.

'Oh, right… Effie and Kai!'

He spun, remembering that his friends were currently facing off against a dozen of powerful Awakened warriors.

However, he didn't have to worry.

The War Maidens… almost all of them were already dead.

Kai was just about to finish off the last one. The young man was clad in beautiful armor forged out of white steel and gold, wielding a swift saber. His battle skill seemed to have improved tremendously since their time on the Forgotten Shore… those months in the army of the Ivory City must have taught him a lot.

Effie was done with her share of enemies, as well. The little girl was now wearing a familiar bronze armor, the white chiton beneath it replaced by the red silken tunic of the War Maidens. The Dusk Shard was also there, on her hand. However, now the heavy round shield was almost the size of her entire body.

Just then, Kai dodged a strike of his opponent, hovered above the floor at an impossible angle, and delivered an unexpected thrust to the War Maiden's abdomen. A moment later, Effie slammed into her with the Dusk Shard. The female warrior fell to the ground, either dead or dying.

Suddenly, the devastated hall of the Temple of the Chalice was enveloped in silence.

The three of them — Sunny, Kai, and Effie — stared at each other

with confused expressions on their faces.

It was all over.

Had they really… won?

# Chapter-676: Glass Knife

Surrounded by devastation, Sunny, Kai, and Effie stared at each other with confused expressions on their faces. Their weapons were still raised, ready to strike at the enemies… however, there were no enemies around.

Just dead silence.

Sunny tensely studied the devastated hall, then slowly pulled out the emerald amulet and looked at the little girl with a silent question written on his face.

"Effie… tell me… is there, perhaps, a slumbering Saint somewhere in the temple?"

She frowned, then shook her head.

Sunny was genuinely perplexed.

"Uh… maybe there is an indescribable horror that had been contained by the chalice? And we have set it free? Or an ancient curse? "

The little girl wiped the sweat off her bruised face, then said in her soft, childish voice:

"Not that I know of. Uh… no, there are no horrors. Or curses."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"So, what… we really won? Just like that?"

Effie stared at him for a bit, and then yelped in outrage:

"What the hell do you mean by just like that?! We just wiped out half a hundred vicious Awakened battle zealots, and you yourself killed

three Ascended champions! Not to mention destroying the chalice… which was supposed to be indestructible, by the way… was that not hard enough for you, you crazy demon?!"

He tilted his head a little and thought about it.

"Well, when you put it like that… I guess it was a bit hard…"

The three of them, especially Sunny, had indeed achieved something remarkable just now. But it still felt weird… he didn't even lose a single limb, body part, or heart!

Well… he did lose half of a horn. That had to count for something, probably?

Sunny scowled. That victory had not been easy — in fact, it had been the opposite of that. However, it had not been as costly as he would have expected it to be.

Three Ascended were no joke, let alone as fearsome as the War Maidens had been. Granted, they had faced him after being mangled by the Strike of Thunder and the consequent explosion of the chalice. And he had only been able to damage the chalice, thus allowing the divine flame contained within to destroy it, because of his insight into how true sorcery worked.

So, in a sense, this victory was the result of those months Sunny had spent barely surviving in the Red Colosseum, as well as his trials in the countless nightmares that gifted him his third Shadow.

…And more than a bit of luck.

He sighed, then asked dubiously:

"So, what? We can just… go?"

Effie looked around, her gaze lingering on the corpse of the white-haired Maiden for a few seconds. Her little face turned somber, and then, she simply shrugged.

"Unless you want to get roasted even more by the divine flames, I suggest we do."

Kai, who had been silent this whole time, looked around, as well. His gaze, however, seemed to be aimed at something beyond the walls of the devastated hall. Then, he lowered his head, his eyes turning dark.

The young man lingered for a few moments, and then said in a low, hoarse voice:

"Are there… are there other children that were being trained in the sect? Do we need to take them with us?"

Sunny froze, then scratched the back of his head in embarrassment.

"Oh, yes. I, uh… did not think about that. The War Maidens were known to take in orphaned girls, right? Where are they?"

He wasn't too happy about the prospect of taking care of a bunch of kids, especially since he had just slaughtered their previous caretakers. But the idea of leaving them here did not sit right with Sunny, whether or not they were just phantasms of the Nightmare.

Noctis would end up having to deal with settling the children in the Sanctuary, anyway.

Effie's childish face slowly turned still, and she briefly glanced down, in the direction where Kai had been looking a few moments ago. She turned away and said in a strangely even tone:

"Ah… there were a few other girls with me before, indeed. But they… well, they didn't make it."

She dismissed the Dusk Shard, then bent down to pick up one of the swords laying on the stones.

"The War Maidens were not bad people, you see… at least not at the start of it all. But somewhere along the way, the sect changed. By the time the girl whose body I took over ended up with them, it was as though… as though everyone here had gone insane."

She walked to the next corpse, stared at it with strange darkness in her eyes, and then picked up another weapon.

"They were obsessed with the idea of creating a warrior capable of

slaying someone called Solvane. So, their training — what they called training, anyway — had grown vicious, cruel, and inhumanly hard. Of all the girls subjected to it, only a handful survived. In this batch, ah… I was the only one."

Effie sighed, then stopped, staring once again at the body of the white-haired War Maiden with a complicated expression.

"Strange, isn't it? It was not like they hated us. On the contrary, they seemed to care about their wards a great deal. Didn't stop them from killing us, though."

She remained silent for a bit, and then added:

"...And despite the fact those girls were being tormented and killed, it didn't stop them from loving their killers. Humans are very weird that way, huh?"

The little girl was silent for a few moments, then suddenly smiled.

"So, yeah. I would like to get out of this place very much. If there is nothing else… let's just go."

Sunny hesitated, then silently motioned to Kai to come closer to Effie. She was putting on a brave face, but he could sense that beneath it, the huntress was... deeply disturbed by what had happened to her in this temple, and what they had done to the temple themselves.

Then, he turned around and headed for what remained of the stone chalice.

As he got closer, the heat of the divine flame grew almost unbearable. Sunny once again activated the enchantment of the Memory of Fire and the augmentation of the Underworld Armament, then moved carefully between the burning shards of stone.

In the spot where the chalice had stood before, surrounded by a ring of flames, a simple knife made of a piece of ghostly glass lay, reflecting the furious white light of the fire. Because of the shape and position of the deep fractures that had spread through the cracked floor, it seemed as though the glass blade had been the epicenter of the terrible explosion.

There was not a single blemish on its surface, though.

Sunny lingered for a moment, then leaned forward and picked up the Glass Knife. It was light and cool to the touch... just how he remembered it. Just to make sure, Sunny glanced beneath the surface of the glass blade and froze for a moment, transfixed by the sight of a single string of fate encased within it, looping endlessly on itself.

Even if he had not seen that knife in one of his nightmares, he would have instantly recognized it for what it was.

The key to an immortal's death. The Ivory Lord's death.

...He had found it.

# Chapter-677: Current of Fate

Outside of the now-empty Temple of the Chalice, the dawn was slowly painting the world in a beautiful shade of lilac. Sunny was sitting on the ground, staring at a scarlet odachi and a spear with a blade etched with runes that lay on the ground in front of him.

Kai had dismissed his armor and was standing nearby, his wooden mask charred and blackened by the heat of the divine flames. His gaze was distant.

Effie was also close. She was standing in front of a pile of weapons, some of them whole, some broken and melted by the fire. Despite her exhaustion and injuries, the little girl, whose body was almost entirely covered by bruises and lacerations, was picking up one weapon after another, then thrusting them into the rocky ground with somber determination.

The graveyard of swords surrounding the temple was slowly growing, thanks to her efforts.

Sunny observed Effie for a while, then sighed. He did not see a lot of sense in leaving so many enchanted weapons behind, even if most of them were only equivalent to Awakened Memories. However, he was also not going to stop the girl from performing the wasteful ritual, as long as it gave her some closure… or whatever it was she was seeking by performing the strange burial.

It gave him food for thought, however.

In the future he knew, there was no such graveyard around the ruined Temple of the Chalice. Which meant that no one had done this last mercy for the War Maidens slaughtered in the great hall. Was that the reason they had turned into vengeful wraiths, perhaps?

…Maybe. Or maybe the swords had just been stolen or destroyed at

some point later in time. He had not seen the rest of the graveyard in the future as well, after all.

So then… what, exactly, was the connection between the Nightmares and the Dream Realm?

Before, Sunny had been sure that Nightmares were simply recreations of the past. Now, however, he was not so certain. After all, the Temple of the Chalice was destroyed in the same exact manner as it had been in the future. Which meant that… he had always been the one to destroy it?

The Seed of Nightmare was a portal to the actual past?

Sunny scowled, then shook his head.

No, this didn't make any sense. If that was true, then too many things would have been changed in the waking world every time an Awakened conquered their Nightmare. The connection was too easy to spot… all he had to do was to go and carve his name into one of the menhirs of the Sanctuary, then check if it had actually appeared outside the Seed.

People weren't fools… they would have known, by now. Nightmares were almost certainly simply recreations of the past of the Dream Realm, and not the actual thing.

However, the coincidence of how the Temple of the Chalice had ended up was too glaring to be natural. Logically, the appearance of Awakened from the Waking World should have changed the course of events that had happened in the past completely. And yet, it had not… at least not yet.

He could think of two explanations for that, one far less frightening than the other.

The first explanation was that this was a simple case of his knowledge of the future informing his actions in the past. Sunny had thought of destroying the chalice because he had already seen it destroyed in the future, and so, the cycle had been complete without any ominous reasons. Just due to a logical connection.

The second explanation… was far more concerning, at least to Sunny. He knew more about fate than most people. He knew how hard it was to change it, let alone escape its stranglehold completely. So what… what if fate had a pull on all things, had influence over all of existence, and pushed everything, everywhere in a certain direction?

To a certain conclusion, no less.

If so, the details of what happened could potentially change, but the end would inevitably, and inescapably, be the same. That… that was a thought that terrified Sunny beyond belief.

He had proclaimed fate to be his sworn enemy, after all. And now, that enemy seemed more fearsome than ever.

...With a grim expression, he glanced at Effie one more time, then rose from the ground and walked over to the pile of weapons, picking one of them up and thrusting it into the ground.

The girl was breathing heavily, her little body seemingly on the verge of collapse. Nevertheless, she glanced at Sunny with a stubborn expression:

"What are you doing?"

Sunny picked up another sword and shrugged.

"...Helping. You must be hungry, are you not? The sooner we are done with this, the sooner you can eat. Everyone wins, no?"

Effie hesitated for a bit, then turned away and nodded slowly. Together, they continued to bury the swords of the Maidens in the rocky soil, with Kai soon joining them.

Before too long, the pile of weapons had disappeared, joining the countless swords surrounding the empty, silent temple.

Sunny did not know if what they had done was going to change fate, even a little bit.

But he hoped ardently that it would.

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The next morning, the inhabitants of the Sanctuary saw a very peculiar thing. A man in a wooden mask and with skin that resembled tree bark effortlessly landed on the soft grass of the island, his tall figure covered by a fitting silk garment.

A moment later, a towering four-armed demon climbed from beneath the island and joined him. However, that was not all…

There was a scrawny girl of about eleven or twelve years of age sitting on the shoulders of the demon, holding his horns with her little hands and swinging her skinny legs wildly.

"Giddy-up! Faster!"

Listening to Effie laugh, Sunny gritted his teeth, then said with irritation:

"Can you… stop swinging your legs? I am not a horse, damn it!"

The huntress did not listen, so he grabbed her legs with two of his four hands and held them in place.

…Which was not easy to do, considering the little girl's monstrous strength.

"Ouch! My bruises!"

Effie made a pitiful face and whimpered.

"Oh, no… please don't hurt me, Uncle Demon! I'll be good, I promise! I'll try to recover from the beatings faster… you don't need to get angry…"

As the people stared at the girl's terribly bruised body with dark expressions, then looked at Sunny angrily, he hissed:

"I didn't… she's not… you stop it right now, Effie! That is not funny!"

The little girl threw her head back and laughed again, then leaned down with a mischievous smile:

"Yes, of course! Whatever you say, Uncle!"

After that, she glanced at the tall menhirs of the Sanctuary and lingered for a few moments, then whispered quietly into his ear:

"...So, let me get this straight. Everyone in this Nightmare was driven insane by the Demon of Desire, and to conquer it, we need to set her free… with the help of a mad Transcendent sorcerer who wants to defy the gods, start a war against the other four Chain Lords, and kill them. And it was that guy, Noctis, who sent you to the Temple of the Chalice. He is the one we are here to see?"

Sunny looked forward with a dark expression on his bestial face, and then growled.

"More or less. We have a thing or two to discuss with him…"

He paused for a moment before adding, murderous flames igniting in his eyes:

"...because I am pretty sure that Noctis, that rotten bastard, has swindled me again!"

# Chapter-678: Wind of Change

The three of them entered the Sanctuary, crossed the beautiful garden, and entered the sorcerer's residence through a familiar wooden door, Effie still sitting on Sunny's shoulders with a curious expression on her childish face.

The rooms within, however, had changed since the last time Sunny had seen them.

The luxurious furniture was gone, as well as beautiful decorations covering the walls. Instead, all that met them was barren stone, with a few broken Sailor Dolls laying on it, their limbs disassembled and laid out around the bodies like macabre pieces of art.

The floor of the whole central chamber was covered by a circle made out of a myriad of runes, powerful currents of soul essence flowing through it and dissipating into the ancient stones. Noctis was sitting in the center of the circle, his eyes closed. Without the familiar carefree smile, his beautiful face seemed ominous and strangely terrifying.

Hearing their footsteps, the sorcerer slowly exhaled. The crushing flood of essence slowly thinned, and then dissipated, retreating back into his body. He turned his head slightly and opened his eyes, which shone in the darkness for a moment, as though full of pale moonlight.

Then, they slowly turned human again, and Noctis smiled, returning to his usual laidback persona so suddenly that it seemed almost disturbing.

"Ah, Sunless, my friend! You are back! Sit down, have a drink… welcome!"

He stood up and outstretched a hand, as if trying to gesture at a set of comfortable seats. Then, a surprised expression appeared on the

Transcendent's face, and he looked around the empty hall with a bit of confusion.

"Oh, right… I've been remodelling…"

Noctis sighed, then clapped his hands together.

"Well, no matter. Dolls! Bring my guests something to drink! They must be parched after their journey!"

His voice echoed around the residence… however, nothing happened.

He hesitated, then glanced at the broken mannequins lying on the floor and awkwardly shifted his feet.

"Ah. How unfortunate."

The sorcerer shook his head, then shrugged and looked at the three of them with a smile:

"Anyway... welcome!"

He tilted his head and stared at Effie, then blinked a couple of times.

"Ah, you have brought a ch—child with you. How curious. It doesn't bite, does it?"

Sunny frowned, but before he could speak, Effie blurted with feigned outrage:

"I am not a child! I am twelve! Uh, almost."

Noctis stared at her with doubt.

"...It speaks. How bizarre."

Sunny slowly inhaled, then said evenly:

"This child is called Effie. She is the friend I have told you about."

The sorcerer's polite smile remained glued to his face. He stared at Effie some more, then furtively glanced at Kai.

"So, uh… one of your friends is a cripple you randomly stumbled upon in my Sanctuary, and the other one is a small child?"

Sunny nodded grimly.

Noctis rubbed his chin, and then cautiously said:

"Sunless, uh… are you utterly sure that you did not just invent having friends? To make me value our own beautiful friendship more, perhaps? If so, let me assure you! I value it a great deal already! There's no need for you to feel insecure just because you are not as beautiful, wealthy, wise, generous, and delightful to be around as me!"

Sunny gritted his teeth and then hissed furiously:

"I am! Wait… I mean I am sure... that I did not invent them! Are you sure that you really want to know the truth about me and my friends?"

Noctis raised his eyebrows with a sincere look on his face.

"Well, of course…"

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, and then said:

"In that case. My friends and I are not actually a demon, a cripple, and a small child. We are humans from a distant future whose souls were sent here by a nearly all-mighty entity known as the Nightmare Spell, after the gods had died and this whole world had been destroyed. Oh, and this place? It is not real! You are not real, too.

All of it is just a complicated illusion created by the Spell to test us three… no, us five, actually. That's the honest truth."

The sorcerer looked at him with wide eyes. Then, he sighed, shook his head, and uttered in a hurt tone:

"Sunless… there's no need to weave such stupid lies to mock me. If you don't want to tell me, you don't have to."

He pursed his lips and turned away.

"...So childish! I take it all went well, then? Since you are in the company of a new friend, you must have successfully infiltrated the Temple of the Chalice, found her, retrieved the Glass Knife, and fled before the War Maidens noticed?"

Sunny flinched, then cleared his throat and remained silent for a couple of seconds. Finally, he said in an even tone:

"Uh… well, actually… not exactly. We did retrieve Effie and the knife, but…"

Noctis looked at him with surprise:

"But what?"

Sunny coughed.

"We sort of… destroyed the chalice and killed all the War Maidens."

The sorcerer stared at him in shock.

"...You did what?!"

Kai sighed, and then strained his vocal cords to speak:

"We were left with no other choice. The Maidens were willing to give us a chance to earn the right to take the Glass Knife away, but they would have never let Effie go. That was a tenet of their sect. So… the sect had to go, instead."

Noctis stared at them with wide eyes, his face turning deathly pale. He swayed a little, and then yelped:

"But what do you mean, you killed all the Maidens?! How did you manage to kill them?! What about their Transcendent sect leader… did you kill her, too?!"

The three of them looked at each other with confusion. Then, Effie cautiously spoke up:

"Uh… the venerable foremother, who was the last Transcendent of the Red Sect, died like two hundred years ago. There were no other

Transcendents among the Maidens since."

The sorcerer blinked a couple of times.

"Wait… really? Huh. So she just went and died? How… pedestrian."

Sunny stared at him, aghast. Did that fool... did he really forget that real people had a habit of dying from time to time, unlike his own immortal self? How insane could that charlatan really be?!

But then, he had to stop himself. No, that was not right. Noctis was no fool, he just enjoyed playing one. There was no chance that the immortal would not have known whether or not there were Transcendents living in his territory. Which could only mean one thing...

Sunny took a step forward and growled.

"Do not insult us! You knew perfectly well that there were no Transcendents in the Temple of the Chalice. And you also knew that you could have easily obliterated that whole place and taken the Glass Knife, if you wanted to. We three are formidable, as far as Awakened go, but not nearly as formidable to be able to do something that a Chain Lord would not have been able to."

He glared at the immortal and said, the emerald amulet almost cracking in his fist:

"So, Noctis, my friend… why don't you tell me the real reason for why you really sent me and Kai there instead of going yourself? And be very careful about what you say… because our beautiful friendship might depend on your answer!"

Noctis remained silent for a while, looking at him with an unreadable expression. Then, he sighed and waved a hand.

"...Alright, alright. If you want to be boring, I'll tell you the truth. No need to get angry."

He clapped his hands again, and the disassembled Sailor Dolls suddenly rose from the floor, their limbs flying up and connecting to the wooden torsos. Then, one of them disappeared for a moment and

returned with a silver goblet full of fragrant wine, presenting it to the sorcerer with frightened reverence. The others backed away and froze, standing silently near the walls.

Noctis took the goblet, took a sip, and looked away with a somber expression on his exquisite face.

"Yes, it is true that I could have retrieved the knife, saved your friend, and destroyed the Temple of the Chalice myself. That would not have been too hard… with or without the Transcendent guarding it. However…"

He stared west, his eyes turning dark.

"...If I made such a move myself, the other four would have learned of it. Then, they would have understood why I made it, and what I am going to do next, as well. They will know my intentions eventually, of course… but now is not the time. Not yet. Revealing it all now would be troublesome."

Sunny scowled, then briefly glanced at Kai. The archer was looking west, too, his shoulders tense.

The Ivory City lay to the west. The Red Colosseum, too.

He hesitated, and then said in a grim tone:

"So you can't act openly out of the fear that the other Chain Lords will unite to attack you?"

Noctis turned to him and smiled.

"...Fear? No, nothing that whimsical. It is simply a matter of convenience. You see, until…"

Suddenly, the sorcerer grew silent. His face turned grave, and his eyes shined with a glint of distant moonlight.

…This time, it was not a performance. Sunny could feel that something had really gone wrong, because the whole room inexplicably changed, becoming much darker, colder, and full of dire tension.

Noctis slowly turned his head and whispered, his voice stunned and solemn:

"Something… something changed… no… no, it can't be…"

He looked toward the doors, and then added with a grim expression.

"We have another guest, I think. A messenger, from the north…"

# Chapter-679: Messenger from the North

The sorcerer seemed shaken. No, more than that… he seemed deeply troubled by something. Noctis stared at the door for a few moments, then frowned and said, his voice devoid of any emotion:

"...Let us go and see who is knocking on my door, then."

With that, he drained his goblet, threw it aside, and walked toward the exit.

Sunny, Effie, and Kai glanced at each other, then followed along. No matter who it was that had come to the Sanctuary, they were currently enjoying the sorcerer's hospitality, so the identity of the new arrival concerned them too.

Who could have affected Noctis that much? Or was the change he had spoken about the real reason for this strange behavior, while the appearance of a guest just happened to coincide with it?

They were going to find out soon.

Together, the four of them — three Awakened and an immortal Saint — crossed the garden of the Sanctuary and walked between the ancient menhirs, to the field of grass beyond. There, an elegant figure waited for them, dressed in an austere black garment. It was a young woman none of them recognized.

The young woman was tall and slender, with pale skin and lustrous raven-black hair that moved gently in the wind. Her face possessed an almost otherworldly beauty to it, its lines full of solemn grace and splendor. However, that lovely face was blemished by a stark flaw — her eyes were covered by a simple strip of black cloth, the same color as the dress she wore.

The contrast between the austere black dress and the flawless white skin, between the softness of her captivating face and the severity of the crude blindfold, created a tantalizing, ominous, and slightly disturbing sight.

…However, Sunny was not paying attention to the young woman's sublime beauty, or to her dress. Instead, his eyes were glued to a single detail…

There was a leather belt tied around the beautiful stranger's slender waist, and on it hung a black scabbard. He recognized the hilt of the blade encompassed within in an instant…

'Quiet... Quiet Dancer? Cassie!'

For a moment, Sunny was overwhelmed by a feeling of profound, boundless relief. She was alive… Cassie was alive… all of them were. And now, despite all the dire trials of this harrowing Nightmare, the four of them were finally reunited.

It was as though a terrible weight that had been crushing his heart all this time, without him knowing, was suddenly lifted.

Sunny felt Effie's grip on his horns grow tighter, and glanced at Kai to see that the young man's eyes were shining behind the wooden mask. The two of them had recognized Cassie, too, and were sharing in his glee.

However, a moment later, Sunny's elation was gone.

He remembered how and why they appeared in this field of grass to meet Cassie, and looked at Noctis with concern. The sorcerer still had an ashen face… and unlike them, he did not have any warm feelings toward the blind girl.

The situation was still strange, and dangerous.

As if sensing his gaze, Noctis frowned, then looked at the beautiful woman with a dark expression and asked coldly:

"An eyeless of the Night Temple… isn't it terribly far for a blind priestess like you to travel south, all alone? Speak, girl… what do you

want?"

Cassie lingered for a moment, then bowed slightly. When she spoke, her unfamiliar voice sounded deep and pleasant. She said:

"Greetings, Lord Noctis. I bring a message from my mistress, the One in the North."

The sorcerer grimaced.

"Oh, yeah? What does that dreadful woman want from me?"

The blind girl remained silent for a few moments, then lowered her head slightly.

"She doesn't want anything, Lord Noctis. My mistress, Lady of the North, blessed of the Black Skies… is dead."

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Noctis swayed slightly, as if struck. He stared at Cassie with a pale face, then raised a trembling hand and silently grasped his neck. After a few moments, he spoke again:

"What are you talking... what is the message she sent, exactly?"

The blind girl was still looking down. Without raising her head, she answered evenly:

"Just these three words. I am dead."

The sorcerer scoffed.

"It takes weeks to get from the Night Temple to the Sanctuary on foot… if one can even make it alive! Was she dead when she sent you? Huh?"

Cassie silently shook her head.

"No. She was alive."

Noctis gritted his teeth in outrage.

"That woman… so insufferable. If she knew she was going to die, she could have said more than three words, at least! After… after everything we shared… ah, she just had to be frustrating till the very end!"

Despite the sorcerer's irritated tone, Sunny could tell that Noctis was deeply aggrieved by the stunning news Cassie had brought… as if he had not been planning to kill the One in the North himself all along. The immortals were very strange people, indeed…

But Sunny was stunned himself. One of the Chain Lords… was already dead? Just like that? After a thousand years of solemn duty, someone had managed to kill the undying Transcendent without alerting the other four?

Suddenly, a feeling of unease grasped his heart. If not one of the Chain Lords, then who could have killed the ruler of the Night Temple?

Who else possessed one of the seven knives?

He knew of only one person…

As if reading his thoughts, Noctis stared at Cassie and asked, his voice trembling with anger:

"So, who was it? Who killed her? Solvane? Or the Ivory Lord?"

The blind girl slowly shook her head.

"Neither. It was a… a creature. A creature that came from the fog."

The sorcerer chuckled.

"...I see. So the Ivory Knife fell into the hands of one of those. Ah, she could have saved herself, if she had only wanted… but she grew indifferent to things like that a long time ago, didn't she? That… that was her madness."

Noctis remained silent for a while, and then suddenly asked, his eyes glinting with his own madness:

"So then, the north is in disarray, the Night Temple is without a leader, and its army needs a new commander? Thousands of soldiers, hundreds of Awakened warriors, all hoping to find someone to serve and protect their families? Right?"

Cassie lingered for a moment, then shook her head again.

"...No."

Noctis raised an eyebrow.

"What? Why not?"

She straightened, then answered simply:

"They are also dead."

The sorcerer blinked a couple of times.

"Huh? Who is dead?"

The young woman remained still as she said, her voice calm and even:

"Everyone. The soldiers, the priestesses, the Awakened, the families. Everyone is dead, and the northern reach stands empty. The creature took them all."

# Chapter-680: Lost and Found

Everyone seemed stunned into a grave silence by these words... even Noctis, who must have heard and seen a lot during his long life. Frozen, Sunny stared at Cassie, his lightless pupils narrowing into two vertical slits. Everyone… was dead?

Everyone?

Had Mordret... slaughtered an entire region? Thousands of people, or even tens of thousands? Mundane humans, Awakened, Ascended… even the Transcendent Lady of the North herself?

Suddenly, a cold shiver ran down his spine.

Sunny knew, of course, that the Prince of Nothing — the owner of the friendly voice he had heard once, in the darkness of a bottomless abyss — was formidable, and would have grown more formidable still after being sent into the body of a Terror. He also knew that Mordret was not completely of sound mind, and that the influence of Hope would have only exacerbated that subtle fissure.

But a slaughter on such scale… he had never even thought that Mordret would be capable of committing something like that… and why? What goal was the banished prince pursuing? He was never cruel without a cold and calculated reason… or at least he had not been, in the past. Every monstrous act that Mordret had perpetrated before was full of perverse, but deliberate practicality.

How could something like that be practical? Even forming a seventh core would not have demanded a hecatomb of that magnitude...

Sunny really did not know how to feel. On one hand, the news of a Chain Lord's demise was beneficial for his plans… in that sense, the Prince of Nothing had already accomplished more to conquer the Nightmare than the four of them combined. But on the other hand,

Sunny just couldn't help but feel uneasy about it… about Mordret.

What was the son of Valor planning?

His thoughts were interrupted by Noctis, who let out a deep sigh.

"Everyone is dead… ah, I barely remember the last time something like that happened. But when I was young, at the dawn of the Age of Heroes, things like that were rather common… you wouldn't remember, I guess. That is what happens when human champions grow unfit for their duty."

He looked away with a dark expression, and then added in a grim tone:

"And we, the champions of this kingdom, have been unfit for quite a while now… if the Lords can even be called champions, still. Come to think of it, I am surprised that this had not happened sooner."

He sighed again, then shrugged and turned to Cassie, seemingly having no desire to elaborate on this strange statement:

"Thank you for delivering this message, girl. If everyone in the north is dead… that makes you the last one, then?"

The blind woman lingered for a moment, then nodded.

Noctis pursed his lips.

"Ah, well, I am very sorry. For what it is worth, you are welcomed to stay here, in my Sanctuary. This is a place for those who are lost, lonesome, and have nowhere else to go. Don't hesitate to ask if you need anything…"

He turned away, as if losing any interest in the conversation, but at that moment, Cassie suddenly spoke:

"Actually, there is indeed something that I need."

The sorcerer stopped, then looked at her with a slight frown and asked with a bit of surprise:

"Really? Oh… then tell me! I am sure I'll be able to help."

The beautiful young woman placed a hand on the hilt of her rapier, and then said, her voice deep and pleasant:

"I am looking for my friends. I wonder if you would be able to help me find them, Lord Noctis."

Noctis blinked a couple of times, then glanced at Sunny, Kai, and Effie with a strange expression on his face. Finally, he answered in a cautious tone:

"Of course! Gladly. But... uh... do you, perhaps… not know how your friends look, where they are, and what they are called? If so, finding them will be...

difficult."

Cassie tilted her head, remained silent for a few moments, and then answered with a bit of confusion:

"...Why would I not know? I am looking for a four-armed demon, a cripple with a grating voice, and a little girl. Their names are Sunless, Nightingale, and Raised by Wolves. They should be here in your Sanctuary, my lord, or at least visited it not too long ago."

Noctis smiled radiantly.

"You would, wouldn't you? Not knowing something like that would be very strange! Gods, finally, someone normal... a four-armed demon, you say? A four-armed... four...

huh..."

The sorcerer's voice trailed off, and then he slowly turned to Sunny, seemingly struggling to say anything else.

Before he managed to speak again, however, there was a sound of little feet pattering on soft grass, and a small figure collided with the young woman, hugging her with inhuman strength.

"Cassie! You're alive!"

Despite the fact that the blind young woman could perceive several seconds into the future and had to have known that Effie was going to tackle her, a bewildered expression still appeared on her beautiful face. She remained frozen for a few seconds, and then hesitantly lowered a hand to pat the little girl on the head.

"Uh… yes, yes I am. I am happy to see you too, Effie…"

The little girl stared up at Cassie, and then made a pouty face:

"What the hell, Cassie? How is this fair? Sunny was short but became tall, Kai was pretty but became hideous, and I… let's not talk about that… but you were pretty before and became even prettier now! The injustice!"

The young woman smiled gently, and then tightly hugged the little girl.

"...Why? I think you became very pretty, too."

Noctis stared at all this, then looked at Sunny with an inexplicable expression. The immortal sorcerer hesitated for a couple of seconds, and then cautiously asked:

"Ah, Sunless… is this beautiful priestess one of your friends, too?"

Sunny glanced at him, and then raised the emerald amulet.

"Yes… the last friend I wanted to find. Her name is Song of the Fallen."

Noctis remained silent for a while, then looked away and mumbled in a barely audible whisper:

"By the Moon… I guess I really need to improve my friend-making skills. Otherwise, I would not be able to call myself the friendliest man in all of the Kingdom of Hope anymore…"

Hearing that, Sunny smiled. He had a reason to.

Their small cohort... was finally back together.

# Chapter-681: The Incredible Adventures and Astonishing Deeds of Heroic Dreamer Sunless in the Lonesome Land of Nightmares, Abridged (Volume III)

Soon, the four of them were gathered in Sunny's room. There was plenty of food on the table, and a kettle of fragrant tea. They had a peaceful meal, avoiding discussing anything important… but soon, it was time to have a serious discussion.

None of the four seemed too excited about the idea, perhaps because doing so would mean revisiting their experiences in the Nightmare and opening up wounds that had barely any time to heal. There were a lot of invisible scars each of them was hiding... none of the four had survived these three months unscathed.

Effie looked at her empty plate for a few moments, and then sighed.

"Can't we just have a few days off before getting to work? The world won't collapse if we take a small vacation… uh, I think…"

Sunny glanced at his friends — the bruised girl, the cripple with a disfigured face, and a beautiful young woman whose empty eye sockets were covered by a black cloth — and slowly shook his head.

"If we do, Noctis might grow… impatient. I promised to give him an answer after I find my friends. He has already been gracious enough to abstain from killing me, putting my soul into a doll... or a mop... and ordering it to give him the knives. So, we better not linger."

Cassie turned her head slightly and asked, her deep, pleasant voice still sounding strange and unfamiliar:

"An answer? To what question?"

Sunny grimaced, then looked away.

"...Right. All of you must have already understood what the conflict of this Nightmare is. Hope, the Demon of Desire… Noctis is preparing to rebel against the will of the gods, kill the other immortals, and break her chains. And we have to either help him achieve his goal, or somehow prevent Hope from escaping.

The former seems insane, but the latter… the latter seems impossible, considering that she is already able to influence the world from inside her prison."

He shivered, grew silent for a few moments, and then added:

"Each of the immortals represents — or rather, embodies — one of Hope's eternal shackles. They can only be destroyed by one of the Sun God's knives. I am in possession of two of the remaining four knives, Noctis knows where the third is being kept, and the fourth one is in the hands of Solvane, who will freely offer it to anyone who can grant her a worthy death.

So… while his plan means going to war against three ancient Saints, it is not entirely crazy. Just… mostly so."

Sunny sighed, poured himself some tea, and concluded:

"So, we need to decide whether we want to help him in this craziness, or not."

Cassie nodded, seemingly not surprised by what he told them. Then, she lingered for a moment, and said:

"Then, first, we need to share everything we learned about the Nightmare while we were apart. The more information we possess, the better informed our decision will be."

Sunny took a sip of his tea and shrugged. That was what he wanted

to do, as well. He studied the faces of his companions, and then gripped the emerald amulet tighter.

"In that case… I will begin, I guess."

Effie, Kai, and Cassie turned to him, trying not to show how curious they really were. And who could blame them? Out of the four, Sunny's situation was indeed the most… abnormal.

He hesitated for a few moments, and then spoke:

"As you might have noticed, the Spell sent me into the body of a demon… a shadow demon, to be precise. I found myself far to the west, in the territory of the followers of War. Even worse, just seconds after coming to my senses, I stumbled upon a beautiful woman wearing red. That woman… was Solvane, the Transcendent priestess of War God. She easily overpowered me, but decided to keep me alive."

Effie's eyes glistened when he mentioned Solvane. Kai, too, seemed to be shaken by that revelation… after all, he had been an officer of the army that was embroiled in a bloody war against Solvane's cult. To soldiers of the Ivory City, her name must have been synonymous with power, death, and horror. To them, Solvane was as much of a person as she was an ancient, terrifying myth.

Sunny's face grew dark.

"After that, I found myself in the Red Colosseum… an ancient theater built by Hope, which the Warmongers had turned into a perverse temple of slaughter. There were thousands of Nightmare Creatures locked in its dungeons, as well as a few unlucky humans. Every day, we were forced to kill each other.

Those who survived received the dubious honor of fighting against the Warmongers themselves, and if we somehow prevailed… well, then we got to live another day, just to repeat the whole process come dawn."

He remained silent for a while, and then added:

"Two months… I spent two months in that purgatory. Of course, I

would have succumbed to my wounds very fast if it wasn't for my partner, a captive young man from the Ivory City… Elyas. His healing Aspect kept me alive, and I kept him alive in the arena. Together, we endured the slaughter, day after day, week after week. Still, our days were numbered, so I kept searching for a way to escape.

And after two months, I finally found it."

Sunny touched the terrible scar on his neck and grinned.

"Turns out, all I had to do was to trick our Ascended jailer into chopping my head off. Free of the collar, I killed him, and then got Elyas to attach my head back…"

Kai, who was in the middle of taking a sip of tea, spat it out.

"...What?!"

Effie only remained silent because she was in the process of choking on a pastry. Her eyes, however, were similarly wide. Even Cassie seemed stunned.

Sunny chuckled.

"Ah, you see. That Transcended priestess, Solvane… actually, I had already killed her once. She had been serving as the host body for a Corrupted Monster the Fire Keepers and I had slain in the Dream Realm to capture the wreck of Noctis's flying ship.

That was where I received an enchanted armor that allows its wearer to stay alive for as long as they have essence… I also had means of regaining essence, and so, I was able to survive without a head long enough for Elyas to heal me."

Effie finally managed to swallow her pastry and glanced at Kai with wild eyes.

"Kai… tell me he's lying, please…"

The young man blinked a couple of times, then solemnly shook his head. The little girl swore, then mumbled in a small voice:

"Crazy bastard… he's crazy!"

Sunny shrugged nonchalantly.

"What? That wasn't even the craziest part. Anyway, Elyas and I almost managed to escape the Red Colosseum, but at the last moment, we were intercepted by Solvane… that cursed fiend."

The smile disappeared from his face, and his black eyes flashed with cold hatred for a moment.

"She… she killed Elyas, tore my heart out, and threw my body into the Sky Below. Luckily for me, this demon body has two hearts, which was why I didn't die immediately. Solvane either didn't know about that or did not care, thinking that the abyss would finish me off. But I survived and found my way back to the Isles, thanks to my Memories."

He sighed.

"...I survived, but was not in the best shape, either physically or mentally. My one remaining heart was not enough to keep this body going, so I was effectively dying, albeit slowly. I made my way south, planning to eventually reach our rendezvous point in the east. However, before I could, I stumbled upon Noctis on the Southern Island."

Sunny smiled bitterly.

"That mad bastard was very happy to see me. He thought that fate had brought us together… and who knows, maybe it did. We made a deal, he and I… Noctis would replace my missing heart, and I would learn the location of the Glass Knife from a Terror that resided in the nearby fortress. That Terror, you see, had belonged to one of the Chain Lords before… had belonged to the Shadow.

So was there a better candidate to meet him than a shadow demon?"

He didn't speak for a while, then let out a heavy sigh.

"The problem was, the centuries of loneliness and being subjected to Hope's poison had driven the creature mad. So, it attacked me. That

Terror had power over dreams and nightmares, and he subjected me to a few hundred of those. In each one, I was horribly tortured, experienced unimaginable sorrow, and was eventually killed. Luckily, I had forgotten most of those nightmares… yeah. Most of them…"

Sunny took a sip of tea, then shook his head.

"...Ah, anyway, eventually, I escaped from the nightmares as well, by breaking all of them, and then killed the Terror. Noctis replaced my heart, as he had promised, and brought me to the Sanctuary. Here, I met Kai, and we went to retrieve the Glass Knife — and Effie — from the Temple of the Chalice. And here we are."

He scratched the back of his head, and then added thoughtfully:

"Overall, I guess it could have been worse…"

Effie swore again, and then shoved another pastry into her mouth. She chewed furiously, and then hissed, sending crumbs flying across the table:

"...What the hell could have been worse than that?!"

Sunny stared at her for a moment, and shrugged.

"I don't know… I could have been sent into a body of a worm? Or even worse… a child…"

# Chapter-682: The Red Sect

Effie stared at him with no amusement whatsoever on her childish face, which only made her attempts to appear serious look more comical. Then, she scowled and said evenly:

"Wanna die?"

Sunny shook his head with a grin, then went into more detail about the things he had learned, including various pieces of information he had gleaned in the nightmares, his experience with the Warmongers, and his observations about Solvane and Noctis.

When he was done, there was silence for a while. The others were digesting all the information he had shared with them, full of thought. Well… everyone except Effie.

The somber silence was soon broken by the sound of loud chewing. The little girl swallowed a piece of meat pie, then blinked a couple of times, noticing that everyone was staring at her. Finally, she wiped the oil off her lips and said:

"What? I am a growing child, you know! I need to eat well to grow big!"

Then, she wiped her oily fingers on the tablecloth and shrugged.

"Well, anyway… I guess I'll go next."

The little girl glanced at Sunny, made a face, and turned away.

"There's not much to tell, anyway. My three months in the Temple of the Chalice were not at all as exciting as Sunny's wild misadventures. Although…"

Her face suddenly grew dim and dark.

"...They weren't very pleasant, either."

Effie sighed, lingered for a few moments, and spoke in a somber tone:

"Basically, I was sent into the body of one of the Red Sect's younger disciples. An orphan girl who had been entrusted to the Maidens, for better or worse… but mostly worse. As I already said, their teachings had grown cruel and perverse over the centuries. Now that I know about how Hope is manipulating everyone's desires, I finally understand why.

That Solvane… she had been raised in the Red Sect, too, a long time ago. The difference is, she managed to escape. But we didn't."

The little girl trembled.

"I ran away once, early on, and managed to make it to the Iron Hand island. But I was caught, and the punishment… at the time, they already knew that nothing they did to me would make me obedient. So, they punished the others in my stead. After that… well, I did not try to escape again. At least while the other girls were still alive."

Effie grew silent for a bit, then shrugged.

"So it was pretty boring. Just endless training… battle training, essence training, body conditioning, and all that stuff. How to endure pain, how to endure fear, how to steel your will. How to be a perfect, merciless, lethal vessel of War. Of course, they were very inventive in their lessons… what better way to teach someone to endure pain than to torture them to the brink of death?

Or over it, if the pupil is weak."

The little girl's face turned distant.

"...In the end, everyone turned out to be weak. Except for me."

She took a bite out of her piece of meat pie, chewed it slowly, and then said:

"One time, they put me in a coffin and buried me alive, for a few days. To teach me how to conquer the fear of darkness. These

wretches… who said that I was afraid of darkness, to begin with? So… so stupid. But mostly, it was just combat training. They trained us ruthlessly.

There's a lot you can achieve with a few Awakened healers and no regard for whether your disciples survive or not. If we broke a bone, the healers would put it back together, and order us to continue. If we bled too much… well, you get the idea."

Effie shook her head.

"The thing was, though, that I was getting it even worse than the rest. The girl whose body I took had the misfortune of Awakening at a very young age, you see. So, the Maidens saw her as their promised chosen one… a prodigious warrior fated to slay Solvane and wash away the humiliation she had visited upon the sect, to avenge her sin and sacrilege. So, they worked me harder than anyone else."

The little girl looked away, then sighed.

"The weirdest part was that all the vile crap they did to us was done without any hint of hatred, malevolence, or bad intentions. On the contrary, the older Maidens treated us like their little sisters — when they were not torturing and killing us, of course. My teacher… Hilde… I think she thought of me as her own daughter. She cared. A lot of good it did, in the end…"

She hesitated for a moment, and then grimaced.

"Well, anyway. Eventually, I was the only one left. Actually, I think they went harder on the other girls because of me. My presence… reignited their fervor, I think. After everyone else died and the Maidens had nothing else to hold over my head, I started planning my escape.

I had no idea if I would survive it, but luckily, before I had the chance to find out, Sunny and Kai came and obliterated the whole sect. Cheers! Thanks, by the way."

She nodded at them, and then stuffed her mouth with another piece of the pie, clearly unwilling to say anything else.

Everyone remained silent, until Cassie leaned over and put her hand on the little girl's shoulder. She gripped it softly, and said:

"You did well, Effie. You did well to survive."

Effie looked down, sighed, and then said darkly:

"Ah, but this time, I didn't just want to survive. I wanted to save a few people, too. But I failed… who cares, though? I am really way too old to be this sentimental. Or maybe that Hope already did a number on my brain… this is just a Nightmare, after all."

Hearing a little girl proclaiming that she was too old to feel grief would have been funny, if it wasn't so sad. No one said anything, until Kai leaned back and sighed.

Then, his grating voice resounded in the stone room, sending shivers running down Sunny's spine:

"Well, in that case, I guess it is my turn. My story is not that long, though. I didn't do much."

He glanced at his hands, with skin that had been replaced by polished tree bark, remained silent for a bit, and then added:

"...I only fought a dragon. And lost."

# Chapter-683: To Kill a Dragon

Kai remained silent for a while, and then let out a heavy sigh. He looked away, picked up his charred wooden mask and stared at it for a few moments, then finally spoke:

"I was sent into the body of a centurion of the Sun Legion, the army of the Ivory City. The city… you must have seen it when we entered the Nightmare, rising from the ashes as the time flowed in reverse. It is a wondrous place… beautiful, peaceful, and full of life, with people who are warm, kind, and care deeply for their neighbors.

Dozens of flourishing islands, all connected into a single whole by the aerial bridges and arching aqueducts built of white stone…"

The young man paused, grimaced, and took a sip of honey tea to smooth his aching vocal cords. Then, he glanced at the mask again, lingered for a moment, and continued:

"At least that was what I thought, at the start of it. Looking back, I was terribly naive… but it was so easy to be misled by how the Ivory City, and its people, appeared — especially by the stark contrast between the splendor of that enchanting facade and the barefaced vileness of those who wished to destroy it. The merciless, mad killers... Warmongers."

Kai shook his head.

"The people of the Ivory City are just like those we know in the waking world. They have the same values, the same ideals, the same regard for decency and human life… ah, now that I say it aloud, I realize they might be doing much better than us in that regard. My point is… is that they seemed nice. Their city was like a beautiful paradise... like a place that all human cities should strive to be.

Was it so unexpected, then, that in this Nightmare, there was

someone who wanted to destroy it?"

His eyes grew dim.

"The followers of the cult of Glory, on the other hand, were exactly like what one would imagine the forces of evil to be. Merciless, cruel raiders that worshipped war, slaughter, and bloodshed, killing simply for the sake of killing.

Their perverse fate, their zealous belief that by destroying the lives of innocent people they were delivering the gift of salvation to their victims… murderers and madmen, each and every one of them. So, you might understand why I was blinded to the truth… for a while."

The young man took another sip of tea, then put down the mask and looked at them with a dark expression.

"In my naivete, I came to believe myself to be a hero of a grim fairy tale. A noble warrior tasked with protecting a beautiful paradise from the tide of evil. I mistakingly considered the fate of the Ivory City to be the true conflict of the Nightmare, and so convinced myself that protecting it was what we had been sent here to do.

Unable to abandon my duty and reluctant to become a deserter, I remained with the Sun Legion, thinking that, sooner or later, you guys will join me."

Kai looked down and sighed heavily.

"...And so, very soon, I became known as a hero of the Legion."

His disfigured face contorted for a moment, but then the young man restrained his emotions and smiled bleakly.

"I know, that fact might sound surprising. Unlike the rest of you, I have never been a fearsome warrior. I have never been a dauntless leader of men, as well. My only real act of bravery was facing the Spire Messengers in the shadow of the Crimson Spire, and even then, I only survived because of Cassie. So… I was very surprised to find myself gaining fame and renown as a fearless battle commander."

Kai looked at them, lingered for a moment, and then said with

uncertainty:

"The war between the Ivory City and the Red Colosseum, you see, has been going on for centuries. Its bloody tides come and go, like those of the sea. Sometimes, only small skirmishes and raids happen for decades, and sometimes, there are terrible battles happening every day.

Sometimes, only mundane soldiers and Awakened officers fight each other, and sometimes, Ascended champions appear to sow devastation on the battlefield. Sometimes, even the Transcendent Lords descend…"

He paused for a few moments, took a sip of tea, then continued in a neutral tone:

"At the time, I found myself in the center of a sudden shift from a prolonged period of relative calm to the start of a massive offensive by the Warmongers. And very early on, I discovered an unexpected truth…"

He glanced at them, thought for a second, as though carefully choosing his words, and said:

"You see, I was always under the impression that warriors of this mythical era, when gods were still alive and magic permeated the world, were infinitely more knowledgeable, powerful, and proficient in battle than we, humans of the Waking World, are. But as it turns out, that is not so. Maybe a long time ago, during what they call the Age of Heroes, they had been.

But now, most of them are far less deadly than we have become… at least those of us who had been forged and tempered by the Forgotten Shore."

Sunny raised an eyebrow, surprised by that statement. Noticing his expression, Kai tilted his head a little.

"...Nightmare Creatures are nowhere near as numerous here as they are in the future. There is no Spell, no Nightmares, no trial of the Dream Realm, no Gates… unlike them, each of us had been forced

into a life of bloodshed and conflict, thrown against unimaginable horrors with no choice to retreat or surrender. The Spell might be a cruel teacher, but its vile lessons seem to be morbidly effective.

Grow stronger or die, there is no other way for us. So, most Awakened from the real world would have experienced more strife and battle encounters than an average Awakened warrior of this time period."

He sighed, and then added somberly:

"That was why even I, despite my humble Aspect and lacking battle prowess, was able to stand out. I led my soldiers to victory, keeping them alive through the sudden attack by a large force of the Warmongers. And then, I kept them alive through the rest of the campaign, wreaking havoc on the enemy anywhere my centuria appeared."

Kai grew quiet for a long time, and then added, his ugly voice suddenly sounding especially hoarse and grating:

"And that was how I gained the attention of the radiant Lord of my city… of Sevirax, the Ivory Dragon."

# Chapter-684: You Must Become a Dragon

Kai poured more tea into his cup, then cradled it in his hands and looked away. He remained silent for a bit, then continued the ominous story:

"After many weeks of battles and bloodshed, the Warmongers were pushed back, and my centuria was recalled back to the Ivory City, to rest and recuperate from the hardships of war. We were met by a jubilant crowd that showered us with rose petals and sang our names… my name, too, louder than all the rest. Ah, what a beautiful sight it was! Victorious, we returned home, and everything was well.

For a while, we enjoyed the beauty of the city and the warm company of our fellow citizens."

He took a sip, then shook his head slightly.

"The more I explored the beautiful Ivory City, the more elated I was by its prosperity and its harmonious way of life. It seemed as though people there were all content and happy, treating others with sincere kindness, love, and respect. It was as though they didn't have a care in the world… and there was a reason for that.

The people of the Ivory City could live this way, and be this way, because they were protected by the mighty dragon, Sevirax, a true descendant of Sun God. Their lord and protector."

The young man shivered, then added in a hoarse voice:

"The dragon protected them, provided for them, and guided them with his wisdom. It was because of him that the Ivory City was safe, sound, prosperous, and welcoming. Why its citizens were so kind and happy. This… was a paradise of his creation."

Kai took a sip of tea and smiled sadly.

"...Sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? Ah, but it was. I was just too slow to see it."

He remained silent for a bit, then let out a long sigh.

"At first, I only felt it. A slight, vague… wrongness. As if something was off with these kind, happy, beautiful people. As if there was something hidden behind their sincere smiles. I dismissed it, thinking that it was just my prejudice speaking. A mindset that I brought with me from the waking world.

But the more time I spent with them… the more strange details I started to notice. And soon, a harrowing suspicion took hold of my heart."

Kai looked at them, his face growing dark.

"...A suspicion that there was madness hidden deep in their lustrous eyes. The same madness that the Warmongers were infected with, albeit of a different shade. I had never… had never felt as disturbed and afraid as when that thought first entered my mind. I was so afraid, in fact, that for a few days, I closed my eyes to the truth and pretended that nothing was wrong.

But the suspicion kept gnawing on my heart, and so, I decided to investigate. It wasn't hard to confirm it."

A bitter grimace contorted his hideous face.

"You see, as it turned out, the Ivory City was indeed prosperous, safe, and beautiful because of the dragon. Its people were indeed protected and provided for by the dragon. In return, the dragon only asked for one thing in return…"

The young man clenched the teacup, almost causing it to crack.

"...To feed him."

He gritted his teeth for a moment, then said quietly:

"To feed him with human flesh. Seven sacrifices had to be made to him every month, from the ranks of the citizens. And the kind, warm people of the Ivory City… were more than happy to provide. Ecstatic, even. Being devoured by the dragon was considered to be a sacred honor, and having a loved one chosen as a sacrifice was a cause for celebration."

The young man grew silent, then said hoarsely:

"...The dragon never dictated who had to be fed to him. But the people of the Ivory City wanted above all else to please the dragon, and so, they always chose the best and the brightest. The most beautiful, the most talented, the most innocent, the most desirable. And there we were, young heroes who had just returned from a triumphant war.

The month was up, and so, they chose me and six of my most brave and loyal soldiers."

Kai smiled bitterly.

"What a reward! The sight of them… was the most disgusting thing I have ever seen. Parents surrendering their children to death with zealous smiles, husbands sending their wives into the dragon's maw with wild joy, friends and neighbors singing and laughing as they led their fellow humans to be eaten by a hungry beast.

Only little children did not share in their glee… they cried when their mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters were torn away from them, not understanding what was happening. But the crying children were punished and taught a harsh lesson about how repugnant their behavior was."

He grimaced, then put his cup down and looked away.

"The whole city was insane. Perhaps… perhaps one could argue that a few dozen souls a year are a small price to pay for a paradise. But what is a paradise built on blood worth? …Worthless. It's worthless. And even if it's not, at least the wretches could have made the sacrifice without the ghoulish joy.

Without the songs, and the zeal, and the kind, warm, sincere smiles on their beautiful faces."

Kai took a deep breath, remained silent for a while, and then shrugged dismissively.

"...Anyway, we were brought to an island that bordered the Ivory Tower itself, and chained to a white cliff. The jubilant crowd disappeared, and soon after that, we heard the rustle of mighty wings. The dragon landed in front of the cliff, as majestic and fearsome as he was in the legends.

A great beast with beautiful ivory scales, and radiant golden eyes that were full of wisdom, nobility, and inhuman intelligence."

Effie was listening with wide eyes, biting her fingers. Finally, she couldn't bear it anymore and asked in her soft, childish voice:

"How the hell did you survive?! Why didn't the dragon's flames kill you?"

A sad smile appeared on Kai's disfigured face.

"How did I survive? Oh… that was simple, really. When Sevirax appeared, I broke my chains and shielded my comrades, ready to defend them until my last breath. Seeing this, the dragon… he spoke to me."

His smile slowly disappeared, replaced by an expression of anger, shame, and regret.

"You must have already guessed that Ivory Dragon Sevirax is also Sevras, the Ivory Lord. One of the Hope's eternal shackles, a Transcendent whose Transformation Ability allows him to turn into a dragon. He is a human… or at least was a human once, a long time ago. And so, he spoke to me."

The young man sighed.

"He was amused by my reaction. We spoke, and what he told me… it broke me, a little, I think. You see, I had it all wrong. The dragon… he had never once asked the people of the Ivory City to sacrifice

anyone, or anything, to him. They had invented the story themselves, and chose the number of the victims themselves, and started bringing him sacrifices of their own free will.

Because doing so made them feel as though they were binding themselves to the dragon… that they were becoming a part of the dragon, and so, were of the dragon, and safe from him."

Kai shook his head.

"Sevirax… Sevras… he had lost a part of himself a long time ago, I think. He told me that, in the beginning, he wanted to be a good lord for the people, someone whom they could see, and whom they could strive to become. And so, he rarely appeared in his Transcendent form before them.

But as centuries passed, he noticed that people were disturbed by his human face, and were only at peace when he came as a dragon. As if they needed him to be something else… something greater than them. And so, after a while, he abandoned his human form completely. And not long after that, the sacrifices began."

The young man lingered for a few moments, and then continued:

"I asked him to spare our lives, but he refused. He told me that he had never accepted an unwilling sacrifice, and I was free. But the other six… it was as though they were in a trance, or had gone mad. They didn't even try to save themselves. No matter how I begged him to spare them, he refused. This was what his people desired, what they needed.

They might have not been bound to him… but he was bound to them. Burdened by them. And so, when nothing else worked… I foolishly tried to stop him."

He smiled bitterly.

"But how could I defeat a dragon? I am not a dragon myself, after all. He swatted me to the ground with one swipe of his tail, breaking my ribs and almost killing me. But I did not die… instead, paralyzed, I watched as he turned his head, opened his maw, and turned my

soldiers into ash with one immolating breath."

Kai grew silent, his face unmoving. After a while, he spoke again:

"...Overwhelmed with anger, grief, and despair, I screamed at him, cursing him, swearing that I will tell everyone the truth, that I will make them realize… that I will make them change. But he just looked at me tiredly and said… that I will see. And then, the Ivory Dragon was gone, leaving me alone on the empty island."

He looked down.

"I was too injured to move, and spent the rest of the night in the throes of pain. In the morning, the citizens of the Ivory City came. When they saw that I was alive…"

A pale smile appeared on his hideous face.

"...they were stunned, scared, and angry. And so, they built a pyre, tied me to a stake… and burned me. No matter what I tried to say, no matter how I tried to make them understand, they wouldn't listen. They only grew more scared and hateful. The dragon… he had been right. He had told me the truth.

I saw."

Kai picked up his tea, took a sip, and looked away.

"My bindings broke before I died, and so, horribly burned, I shot into the sky like a spark. I flew away from the city, and somehow survived. Crippled and heartbroken, I slowly made my way east, finally reaching the Iron Hand island, and then the Sanctuary, where Sunny eventually found me. Lord Noctis had replaced my burned skin and damaged muscles with enchanted wood and tree bark, and here I am.

As good as new."

He sighed, looked at them, and smiled:

"Luckily, I had friends that helped me pick myself up. You guys. I'll do whatever it is you decide to do... but if there is one thing I want to

say, it is this. If Noctis wants to kill Lord Sevirax and end the dragon's reign, I would be happy to lend a hand."

# Chapter-685: Temple of the Night

When Kai was finished with his story, everyone remained silent for a while. Eventually, the young man sighed and stretched out his hands, which were covered in polished bark and looked more like those of one of the Sailor Dolls than those of a human. He moved his fingers, and then smiled lightly:

"Noctis did a wonderful job of healing my wounds. Just as he had said, some of the pain remains, but I am as strong and capable as I had been before. No, even more so… these enchanted limbs he gave me are much more sensitive to soul essence, and so, they are more durable and powerful than my own flesh had been. I also collected a few Memories during my time in the Sun Legion.

Overall, my battle prowess has increased a lot since we entered the Nightmare… not to mention the experience I earned, and the lessons I was taught. Whatever comes, I am ready."

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then let out a low growl:

"What about the other Transcendent of the Ivory City? The Sun Prince? Have you met him?"

Kai frowned and made a vague gesture with his hand.

"Yes… I think. The Sun Prince is supposed to be a brother of Sevirax. Among the people, it is believed that his soul resides inside the metal colossus that guards the Ivory City and sometimes leads the Sun Legion into battle. I've seen him once, from afar… and to be honest, I am not quite sure if that thing is sentient or not."

He hesitated for a bit, and then added:

"You've seen him, too. I think that it is his corpse that swings beneath the Shipwreck Island, tangled in the chain… although I can't quite imagine what kind of force could have destroyed that implacable giant. He is at least ninety meters tall, with a body cast out of solid steel, and nearly invincible. He is...

he is also not a living creature, really, and so can't be killed by wounding or damaging his body."

Sunny remained silent for a bit, and then said:

"There is nothing that can't be killed or destroyed... not even the gods. So then… three of the Chain Lords are accounted for, in the future. We've seen the bones of the dragon, Sevirax, on the Ivory Island, and both his brother and Solvane found their doom near the wreck of Noctis's ship. But what… what exactly happened? How did they fall, and how did Hope escape?

What happened to Noctis himself, as well as the One in the North? How was the Ivory City destroyed? How did the Tower break free of its chains?"

No one answered, as perplexed as he was. After some time, Cassie finally spoke:

"I am not sure what happened. But I know one thing — because of our arrival, it is happening faster."

They turned to her, and after a moment of silence, Sunny asked:

"...Yours is the last story left. And, to be honest, it is the story I am interested in hearing the most. Because it concerns the fifth Awakened sent here by the Spell. Mordret… he found a way to enter the Seed with us, didn't he?

Cassie sighed heavily and turned her head away. After a while, she said:

"Yes. Yes, he did…"

The blind young woman remained silent for a few moments, gathering her thoughts, and then faced them again.

"Unlike what happened to the three of you, my arrival into the Nightmare was not too harrowing. At least not at the start. I was sent into the body of a young priestess whose duty was to tend to the High Priestess of the Night Temple… the One in the North. In this era, the Night Temple still belongs to the cult of the Goddess of the Black Skies — of Storm God.

The deity of darkness, stars, and guidance. And so, no light is allowed on the temple's premises."

She touched her blindfold briefly, then slowly lowered her hand.

"The acolytes spend long years living in the darkness, and blind themselves before becoming priestesses. For that reason, they are known as the Eyeless. Many of the Eyeless are seers, and possess powers of prophecy and divination. For most, becoming a blind priestess inside a lightless temple would have been a terrible trial. But for me… it was strangely soothing.

To find myself among those similar to me, in a place where my blindness wasn't an aberrant oddity, but instead a choice."

A pale smile appeared on her lips.

"...However, it was my lady that I found the most comfort in. The One in the North, the Oracle of the Night… she was not unkind. She treated me well enough, and I have learned a lot from her knowledge and wisdom. However, just like the rest of the Chain Lords, she was being consumed by an insidious madness. Hers… was the madness of apathy.

Over the centuries, my lady grew indifferent to most things happening in the world, or even to herself. That was why she needed attendants, and I was one of them."

The smile slowly disappeared from Cassie's face.

"That didn't mean that she was powerless or without responsibility, though. All of the northern reaches of the Kingdom of Hope were under her authority and protection. There were many villages and several towns full of mundane humans who relied on the Night

Temple for safety and guidance.

For that reason, the One in the North ruled not only over the blind priestesses, but also over a small, but fearsome army comprised of both mundane warriors and Awakened."

She sighed slightly.

"Their numbers might not have been as large as those of the armies of the Ivory City and the Red Colosseum, but due to their prowess and my lady's prophetic gift, the north was never attacked by either. The people rarely suffered from the Nightmare Creatures, as well."

Cassie grew silent, and a scowl slowly appeared on her beautiful face.

"...But as the One in the North grew more and more indifferent, that slowly started to change. Still, when I found myself in the Night Temple, things were still more or less fine."

Her scowl deepened, and her face grew dark and despondent. The blind young woman lingered, and then said in a grim voice:

"Until they weren't."

# Chapter-686: Creature of the Fog

It was getting late, and darkness crawled into the stone room, drowning its corners in shadows. Cassie sat motionlessly, the graceful lines of her beautiful face contorted by a deep scowl. Then, a heavy sigh escaped from her lips.

"It started soon after I entered the Nightmare, but no one paid it much attention at first. There were just strange rumors that reached the temple, resembling scary stories that people like to tell each other when the sun is gone and darkness envelops the world. Rumors of a pleasant voice that came from the fog."

She gritted her teeth for a moment.

"Perhaps if my lady's affliction was not as severe, we could have done something then. After all, in this world, scary stories often come true. And this one was more ominous than the rest, because it had to do with the fog. The Night Temple stands at the boundary of the Hollow Mountains, after all… and of the mist that shrouds them. But she was distant and uncaring, and so, we had grown aloof, too."

Cassie somberly shook her head, then continued, her low, deep voice enveloping the room and her three listeners:

"As time went by, the rumors started to change. They grew more menacing and dire, telling tales of people who listened to the fog and disappeared without a trace. At that point, the Eyeless grew concerned, suspecting that a corrupted creature had found its way into their land. Many of them possessed a high affinity to revelation, after all, and they could feel it... unease, threat, danger.

So, a priestess was sent to investigate, escorted by a squad of experienced Awakened soldiers. And at the same time, it was decided

that a divination would be performed."

She lingered for a moment.

"The divination showed no result, and the priestess… she failed to return with useful clues. In fact, she did not return at all. She and her escort disappeared without a trace, as though they had never existed. Just like the people from the rumors… only, by then, no one thought of them as mere rumors anymore."

The blind young woman shivered, then said in an even voice:

"Finally, we became alarmed. The army was summoned, and many hunting parties were sent out to find the creature. Mundane soldiers, Awakened warriors, Ascended champions, the Eyeless… everyone was determined to catch the abomination. But despite all our efforts, we failed… how could we catch the fog?"

Cassie's face darkened.

"And all the while, people continued to disappear. First one or two at a time, then scores of them, and then, one day… we found a whole village that stood empty, not a sign of its inhabitants in sight. Everyone there — every man, woman, and child — was taken by the fog."

She grew silent for a few moments, then added grimly:

"And then, hunting parties started to disappear, too. Powerful, experienced soldiers... we even lost an Ascended. The worst part, however, was that there was no pattern to the creature's movements… at least none that we could recognize. It could attack a settlement far to the west one day, and then suddenly take someone far to the east the next.

It was almost as if it could be in several places at the same time. Because of that, we couldn't throw all our forces into one location and corner it on a single island. And so, we constructed a trap for it… all we needed was a lure, and I volunteered to become one."

The blind young woman shook her head.

"...Of course, back then, I didn't know that the fiend of the fog was far more cunning and devious than any Nightmare Creature I had ever faced. But I found out… found out very soon. Because that was when I met him again. And as soon as I did, I realized that what we thought of as a trap for the fiend was, instead, a trap that the Prince of War lured us in instead."

Cassie gritted her teeth.

"Because while our forces were concentrated to form the encirclement, most of the northern reach remained unprotected. And so, left without defenders, one of the towns was taken by the fog. A thousand souls, gone. Slaughtered…"

A deep scowl appeared on Sunny's face. He leaned forward, piercing her with an intense gaze:

"What? How? If he was engaged in a battle with the forces of the Night Temple, how did the bastard simultaneously attack the settlement?"

She lingered for a while, then said with a hint of uncertainty:

"That… Mordret, he was not how he had been in the future. He had grown… weaker, somehow. As if he did not possess six soul cores anymore. But, instead, there were five strange creatures helping him — like the lesser versions of the one you had killed on the Reckoning island.

While we fought the prince himself, the five creatures attacked the town that we had left unprotected, slaughtering every human who lived there."

Sunny leaned back, stunned.

"...What?"

'Five of them… five Reflections? Did he tear his soul apart to create them, granting each a single soul core?'

Suddenly, a frightening thought entered his mind.

'No… no, this can't be!'

Divine Aspect holders like Mordret and him followed a slightly different path than the rest of the Awakened. Unlike those with Aspects of a lesser Rank, they could create seven soul cores by absorbing fragments — whether of souls or shadows, didn't matter.

But there was still a limit to the number of cores they could create, and to grow more powerful after that, they had to challenge Nightmares like everyone else. So, Mordret's slaughter did not make any sense. He had already been a Terror in the future, after all.

…Creatures, however, followed a path that was different entirely, and almost reversed. By absorbing fragments, they did not create new soul cores. Instead, they rose in Rank — like Saint, for example, who had to consume shadow fragments from Memories in order to Ascend.

If Mordret's Reflections were the same as Saint… if they only needed a certain quantity of fragments to rank up... then there was no limit to how many fragments they could devour, and no end to their growth, not until they reached the mythical Divine Rank.

So if the Prince of Nothing sacrificed five of his six soul cores to create five Awakened Beasts…

...Then what was their Rank now, after consuming thousands upon thousands of souls?

# Chapter-687: Oracle of the Night

Effie and Kai seemed like they had some questions, but they chose to remain silent… at least for now.

Of course, they knew who Mordret was and had a general impression of his powers — Sunny and Cassie had described their experience in the Night Temple to them in enough detail, so that their friends, as well as the Fire Keepers, knew what they would be facing should they cross paths with the Prince of Nothing.

However, even Sunny himself had only a vague understanding of how Mordret's Aspect functioned, and so did Cassie. So hearing how powerful he had grown in the Nightmare was a shock to him.

'The Mirror Beast was a devil… had it been created as such, or had it earned more cores in battles with powerful Nightmare Creatures, as Saint did? If it is the former… then does it mean that Mordret was more than a Terror once? He had many Reflections before clan Valor imprisoned him, too… gods, just what kind of a menace was Anvil's firstborn in the past?'

And, more importantly… just how dangerous was he going to become in the future?

His somber thoughts were interrupted by Cassie, who spoke again after remaining silent for a while:

"In any case, destroying Mordret's body was not too hard. He appeared wearing the body of the priestess who had been first sent to find him, anyway. But, of course, doing so was useless, because he could just take another. In the chaos of the battle, I couldn't explain what dire powers the enemy possessed to the forces of the Night Temple. And, more than that…"

She shook her head somberly.

"...In the moment, I was not sure that it would have been the right thing to do. Was I meant to help the inhabitants of the Nightmare slay one of the Awakened from the waking world? Were we not supposed to be allies? No matter how vile Mordret was and despite what had happened between us in the past, here in the Nightmare, both he and I were meant to pursue the same goal."

The blind young woman sighed.

"So, after a bloody battle, Mordret escaped our trap and disappeared. Soon after that, we learned of the massacre that had taken place while we were distracted by his deceit. And after witnessing the desolate town that his Reflection had slaughtered… I was disabused of the notion that he and I were the same in any way. Sadly, by that time, it was already too late."

Cassie lowered her head, then continued quietly:

"After feasting on the souls of the town's inhabitants, the Reflections became much more powerful. Mordret was not bound by the necessity to stay hidden anymore, as well. His attacks grew much more frequent and devastating, and the number of his victims started to grow with chilling speed. The more people he killed, the more dangerous he became.

He was not invincible, of course… among the Awakened serving the Night Temple, there were a lot of those who possessed means to contain him. Especially the Eyeless, who, like me, were immune to his possession. But Mordret knew that as well. And so, he went after those who could threaten him first."

She paused for a moment, her face growing solemn.

"...Eventually, people — those who were still alive, at least — became so terrified that they left their homes and fled to the Night Temple, hoping that the High Priestess would protect them. The army and the priestesses grew desperate, as well. We begged the One in the North to intervene.

She was a Transcendent, and an oracle without an equal, after all… and despite her indifference, my lady promised to face the creature

herself. That day, people were so relieved that they held a grand celebration."

Cassie remained silent for a while, and then continued, her voice growing sad and wistful:

"...While everyone was celebrating, however, my lady summoned me in secret, and asked me to deliver a message to her old friend, Lord Noctis, in the east. Just three words… I am dead."

She paused for a moment and turned away, her beautiful face growing still.

"I was appalled, of course. What about her immortality? What about all these people whom she promised to protect? She smiled sadly, and told me… that they were all dead, as well. And that it was better that way."

A heavy sigh escaped from Cassie's lips.

"I left the next morning, and made my way south all alone. Traveling through the wilderness of the Kingdom of Hope, blind and without anyone's help, was not easy. But I managed to survive, somehow. Whether by luck or due to the One in the North protecting me, Mordret never intercepted me. I had to face a few powerful Nightmare Creatures, though… as well as other dangers, along the way.

I overcame these obstacles and eventually reached the Sanctuary. And on the day that I arrived, I finally felt it… the sudden change."

A dark expression appeared on her face.

"My lady had died, and another flaw was added to Hope's prison. The approaching disaster was accelerated even more. You… you know the rest."

For a moment, Sunny could sense a hint of profound sorrow in Cassie's voice, but then it disappeared, and the blind young woman smiled:

"So, now… I guess we know enough to make a decision about

whether or not to support Noctis in his war against the rest of the Chain Lords."

He frowned, and then said in a grim tone:

"There is one thing we don't know, though. Something that can potentially change everything. Mordret… what is his goal? What is he going to do when the four Chain Lords go to war?

Cassie hesitated and slowly shook her head.

"That I don't know. He must have realized the nature of the Nightmare's conflict himself, by now… or maybe he had always known it, through means that none of us can even guess about. He was the one who had sought out this Seed, put the idea of seeking out the knives into our heads, and manipulated us into bringing him here, after all.

No matter what his goal is, though… I doubt that he just wants to become a Master. He is here for something else, as well."

Sunny remained silent for a bit, then let out a frustrated growl and turned away.

"Alright, then. I guess it is time to choose our fate…"

# Chapter-688: Big Decision

No one spoke for a while, before Effie finally broke the silence:

"...I mean, it is not much of a choice, is it? Sure, going against three immortal Saints does not seem like a picnic. But we already know that they had been defeated in the end, somehow, so it is not impossible to do. And we don't even know what the alternative is. How do we ensure that Hope doesn't escape her prison? Kill Noctis?

That would only delay the inevitable, since this whole damned place is already on the verge of collapse because of her influence. That Hope… she is scary…"

She hesitated for a moment, then asked with a bit of confusion:

"To be honest, I am not even sure what she is. What kind of a demon is powerful enough to drive a whole region mad? Is she Unholy?"

Sunny sighed, then massaged his temples.

"...No. If anything, she is Divine. She is also not a demon… she is a daemon. Daemons were… lesser deities, of sorts, who are said to have created themselves. They appeared out of nowhere, possessing powers that were similar to those of the gods, but different. The Spell has a weird tendency to never mention the word "daemon", though… for some reason.

In any case, it seems that the gods and the daemons eventually had a big, terrible war… and Hope's imprisonment and escape were a prelude to that war, I think."

Effie listened to him without any particular expression, then said listlessly.

"Oh, well in that case... that just proves my point! Trying to keep a

thing like her in chains… ah, doesn't killing three immortal Saints suddenly seem easy, in comparison?"

Kai moved slightly, and then, his hoarse voice suddenly resounded in the stone room:

"I think we are looking at it wrong. The question is not what should we do… it is what should be done, don't you think? Yes, there is no particular way in which a Nightmare has to be resolved… but that doesn't mean that some resolutions cannot be right, and some cannot be wrong. This land has been turned into hell by Hope, who is trying to escape her chains.

Until she is released, that will not change."

He leaned forward, frowned, and added somberly:

"The Red Colosseum, the Ivory City… and all across the ruins of her kingdom, madness reigns, turning humans into wicked perversions of themselves. Sure, we can win by prolonging it. But should we? Would we be at peace with such a conclusion? You can call me naive, but I think that although the Spell does not dictate what the challengers do in the Nightmare, it still matters why we do it.

We are still responsible for our actions, and their consequences. So, I think that we need to do what is right."

Sunny glanced at him and then asked, his voice harsh:

"Who's to say what is right? How do you know that by releasing Hope, we won't be dooming everyone living here to an instant death? A thousand years in chains… personally, I would have been a bit angry..."

Kai lingered for a moment, then shook his head.

"You are right, I might not know what is right. But I do know what is wrong. And what I saw here was deeply, deeply wrong."

Sunny stared at him for a bit, then shrugged.

"Well, it's not like I disagree. In fact, I hate this place with a passion. I

don't really care if Hope simply kills everyone, either… as far as I'm concerned, the bastards deserve it."

He waited for a few moments, then turned to Cassie.

"What about you? You've been terribly quiet."

The blind young woman hesitated for a while, then spoke evenly:

"I am… willing to do whatever you decide. I'll trust your judgment, Sunny."

He frowned, studying her face with a dark expression.

"Why? You don't have an opinion?"

Cassie remained silent for a bit, then simply shook her head.

'Damnation.'

He knew, of course, why the blind girl was reluctant to speak. She must have seen something… a glimpse of the future that she did not want to share, knowing that it would affect their thinking, possibly informing the very event she wanted to happen… or wished to avoid.

Her own opinion was already compromised by that knowledge, and so, Cassie had decided to remove herself from the decision completely. It seemed as though she had grown wary of her visions, and the consequences of acting on them, after the Forgotten Shore.

'Damned oracles...'

Sunny sighed, then glanced at Effie and Kai.

"Well, then there is not much to discuss. The two of you are keen to join Noctis, and... I guess I am too. He might be a madman, but at least he is a madman we know. And, uh… I also sort of like the guy. Despite the fact that he is a dishonest, lying, conniving, crazy, dastardly cheat.

No one is perfect, you know?"

Effie giggled.

"Wow, it's almost as if he's reminding me of someone. Huh, now who might that be…"

Then, she grinned at Sunny and asked:

"That's settled, then. So… should we go and deliver the good news to that dastardly cheat? You know… about how he doesn't need to kill us and put our souls into home appliances?"

She seemed like she was ready to go, but Sunny stopped her with a hesitant gesture.

This next part… he had thought about it a lot, not knowing if it was the right thing to do, or a giant mistake. He was still not sure, but had a feeling that the decision he had made in the end was a correct one.

At least it felt that way.

In any case, there was no going back...

Sunny remained silent for a bit, and then glanced at his friends with a tense expression.

"Before we do… there is something I need to tell you."

Effie and Kai stared at him with slight surprise written on their faces, while Cassie's eyebrows suddenly flew up.

She already knew what was about to happen, of course.

Kai looked at him and smiled.

"Oh? What is it?"

Sunny sighed, turned away, then faced them and shrugged.

"Ah, it's nothing too serious. Just… well… to tell you the truth…"

He gripped the emerald amulet tighter, and said:

"My Flaw is that I can't lie. I have a True Name, which I received in my First Nightmare. My Aspect is of the Divine Rank. I have three Soul Cores… uh, actually, Shadow Cores… which technically makes me a demon. Hence this ugly body. I have already unlocked my Aspect's Legacy.

I inherited the lineage of one of the seven daemons. Oh, and also… how do I say this... I might be Lord Mongrel? Sorry about that one, Kai…"

# Chapter-689: Trust

Effie, who was already standing up to leave, froze, then slowly sat back down. Kai dropped his wooden mask to the floor and stared at him with wide eyes. Even Cassie seemed a bit stunned, despite knowing most of the things he had just said already.

A deathly silence settled in the room, and Sunny found himself being pierced by two dumbfounded gazes.

He scratched his neck, then coughed awkwardly and looked away.

"Yeah… that's more or less all that I wanted to say…"

Of course, the decision to reveal these secrets to his friends had not been an easy one. In fact, it went against everything that Sunny believed in… every instinct in his body screamed that he was making a terrible mistake.

But instinct was not always the best advisor. Otherwise, what was the point of having intelligence and the ability to think about your decisions?

The fact of the matter was that Sunny had already done irreparable damage to his relationships once because of his untrusting nature. Back on the Forgotten Shore, he had kept his secrets a little bit too well, failing to understand how his deceptiveness would make others perceive him.

Sure, he had a reason to behave the way he had… and yes, he had never really lied to his allies, simply withholding or manipulating the information a little to keep himself safe.

But the others did not know about his reasons. All they knew was that their trust was never returned fully, and that he was full of secrets, discrepancies, and insidiously subtle ways to keep those

secrets to himself. Sunny had never explained himself… and in the absence of an explanation, the misunderstanding was bound to inevitably take its place, perhaps to dire results.

Who knew… if he had been more open with Nephis, she might have not considered him a liar, absorbing that false perception into her own forming self. Would things have ended differently, then?

Regardless, currently, Sunny knew both the Aspects… and, more importantly, the Flaws of every member of the cohort. But they couldn't say the same. They revealed their weaknesses to him, but he held on to his own, failing to reciprocate this trust.

For now, everything seemed fine… but that one-sided nature of their friendship was bound to fester in the future, and the small crack it created could grow in size, eventually destroying it.

Plus… even Mordret knew his secrets. It would have been silly if the Prince of Nothing did, but Effie and Kai did not. Not to mention dangerous…

So, Sunny decided to take a leap of faith and put his trust in his friends. It had been a long time coming, anyway… but, damnation!

Why did being honest with people feel so… disgusting?

'What a loathsome sensation… curses, I'm all itchy…'

…After a full minute of stunned silence, Effie finally spoke, her voice sounding uncharacteristically tame:

"Now… hold on, wait a minute…"

She raised her small hand and showed one finger.

"Your Flaw… we sort of already had a general idea, after spending so much time with you. It is still… wait, you can't lie at all? What?"

Sunny shrugged.

"I can't say a lie aloud, and I am compelled to answer any question asked of me truthfully, or at least to the best of my ability."

He expected some sort of spicy question to follow immediately, but Effie remained silent, showing just how bewildered she was. Even her usual mischievousness disappeared. Instead, the little girl simply raised a second finger.

"...Alright. The True Name… we sort of figured that out, too. You seemed reluctant to share it, for some reason, so Kai and I did not press."

Sunny let out a heavy sigh, hesitated for a moment, then forced himself to speak:

"That… has to do with an Innate Ability of my Aspect. If certain conditions are met, it can make me vulnerable to those who know my True Name. That is why I kept it a secret… and also put a lot of effort into appearing as weak and pathetic as possible, so that no one would even suspect that a weakling like me could possess a True Name."

His face grew a bit dim.

"Being considered a weakling is generally great, because it makes enemies underestimate you. I'm more than fine with people thinking little of me. But… uh… after I started pretending, things got out of hand really fast…"

Effie blinked a couple of times, remained silent for a moment, and raised a third finger.

"Well, I guess that explains a few things. Now, about Lord Mongrel — we knew, of course! I mean, it was sort of obvious…"

At that point, both Kai and Cassie turned to her and spoke simultaneously. Kai seemed even more surprised than before:

"What?! I didn't know!"

...Cassie, meanwhile, seemed a bit confused. She asked hesitantly:

"Uh… I am sorry, but who is Lord Mongrel?"

Effie stared at them with a funny expression.

"What do you mean, you did not know? You were the one who helped him buy that armor!"

Kai opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again:

"...Wait, what armor? I helped… the stone armor from the Memory Market? That dusty, ugly thing? No, it's not the same! The material is completely different! The fit, the design… Mongrel's armor is very chic!

Not at all like that cumbersome stone clunker!"

Sunny covered his face, then said somberly:

"The stone changes to a stonelike metal due to an enchantment… it was just broken and required an Awakened to activate the restoration process. As for the fit, you do remember that Memories adjust themselves to accommodate the owner's body, right? Hell… now that I have a tail, even it is armored when I summon the Mantle."

The young man stared at him with a lost expression, then leaned back on his chair.

"Oh… uh… I see, then. But, I mean... no, never mind..."

Sunny massaged his temples.

"I never meant for Mongrel to get famous. I just wanted to practice swordsmanship in the Dreamscape, and all good aliases were already taken. Who knew that a damned broadcaster would spread the clip of me dispatching him everywhere on the network? Oh, gods… and things only got worse after that..."

Effie looked at him, then at her three fingers, then made a little fist.

"But the rest… a Divine Aspect?! What?! Do those even exist?! Three soul cores?! A daemon's lineage… what even is that?! And what is next, are you going to tell us that you have a Divine Memory, or something?!"

The little girl let out a nervous giggle and mockingly shook her head.

Sunny stared at her for a bit, then cautiously cleared his throat.

"Ah, well… actually… I have two…"

# Chapter-690: One Question

Some time later, Sunny left the room, walked between the tall menhirs, and entered the sprawling garden of the Sanctuary. The cohort had intended to talk to Noctis together, but after his bombshell of a revelation, the others needed some time to digest all the new information and decided to stay behind.

'Understandable…'

In truth, Sunny wanted to be alone for a few minutes, as well. Although he felt that he had made the right decision, revealing his secrets was… an uncomfortable experience. He felt as if an invisible weight had been lifted off his shoulders, a bit, but also rattled and uneasy. He felt... naked.

Sunny could use a little solitude to gather his thoughts, too.

After the initial shock, he had gone into more detail about his capabilities, explaining how a Divine Aspect worked, and the circumstances of how he earned it. However, it was not like he knew a lot about this matter himself, so the conversation was not too long.

It had helped the others better understand his powers, as well as that of Nephis… and, most importantly, of Mordret. Now, they were as ready to face the Prince of Nothing as they could be, should a conflict with him happen. Additionally, due to everyone gaining deeper insight into Sunny's powers, their already profound synergy as a battle unit was bound to grow even more refined.

Sunny kept a few things to himself, as well. The difference was that if before there had been a strange dynamic between him and his friends, where they pretended to not know that he wasn't being entirely honest with them, and he pretended to not know that they knew… now, the existence of those white spots had been openly acknowledged by him.

Effie and Kai understood that there were things he wasn't ready to share, and why he was reluctant to do so. They seemed to respect his wishes.

All in all, it went surprisingly well.

Walking through the beautiful garden, which was illuminated by the pale light of the full moon, Sunny enjoyed the tranquil air of the Sanctuary. At some point, however, a slightly disconcerting thought entered his mind:

'I wonder… was this decision of mine influenced, to some degree, by Hope's poison? If so… what deep desire of mine had she amplified to push me toward being honest with my friends, for a change?"

Suddenly thoughtful, Sunny approached the door of the sorcerer's lair, waited patiently for the Sailor Dolls to open it, and walked inside.

'Maybe I was always…'

His eyes suddenly narrowed, and his hand shot to the side, ready to grasp the shaft of the Cruel Sight. Something was very wrong inside the dark hall… a thick, nauseating smell of blood invaded his nostrils, sending adrenalin coursing through his own. It surrounded him like a suffocating wave, as though a terrible massacre had just taken place in the immortal sorcerer's quarters.

…But Sunny did not see any corpses. The central chamber was just as he had left it the last time — empty of all furniture, with a vast circle of runes drawn on the stone floor. No, not entirely the same… the floor had cracked in several places, as though something was pushing at it from beneath, exerting devastating pressure on the ancient stones.

Noctis was still in the center of the circle. One of his sleeves was rolled up, and there was a deep cut on his left wrist, a stream of blood running down his hand and falling down like a crimson ribbon. In his other hand, he held the diamond sickle. The sorcerer was surrounded by a shallow pool of blood, however, it somehow failed to touch the hems of his garments.

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, noticing that the stone surface… seemed to be slowly absorbing the blood. Then, he gripped the emerald amulet and asked evenly:

"...Are you trying to kill yourself?"

Noctis slowly opened his eyes, glanced at Sunny, and smiled brightly. Then, acting as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening, he wiped the diamond sickle, hid it in the folds of his silk garment, and stood up:

"What? Of course not! I'm too young to die!"

Sunny gave him a dubious look.

"Young? You are at least a thousand years old."

The sorcerer tilted his head, scratched his cheek with a thoughtful look, and then smiled even brighter:

"...What? Of course not! I'm too beautiful to die!"

Happy with himself, Noctis somehow made the cut on his wrist close, jumped over the pool of blood, and walked toward Sunny with a relaxed expression.

"Come… this place needs to be aired, I think. The garden is nice and chill, though."

Sunny threw one last look at the disappearing pool of blood. Did he imagine it… or had the stone floor of the chamber trembled slightly, just then? Shaking his head, he turned away and followed Noctis outside.

Together, they slowly headed for the Altar Island. Noctis seemed to enjoy the silence of the moonlit garden a lot… a minute or two later, though, he broke it with a carefree question:

"So, what did you want to tell me? Have you and your friends come to a decision?"

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then answered:

"We did. We… will help you free Hope."

Noctis grinned.

"Oh, wonderful!"

After that, he didn't say anything else.

Sunny waited for a while, a little confused. They had already reached the white altar and sat down on a stone bench, enjoying the sight of the pristine lake, with a pale circle of the moon reflecting on its calm surface. And yet, the sorcerer seemed to lose his ability to speak.

Slightly irritated, Sunny hesitated for a moment and then asked awkwardly:

"...So? Do you need me to give you the knives?"

Noctis looked at him with an easy smile and shrugged.

"Ah, no need. Keep them."

Sunny's eye twitched.

"What do you mean, keep them?! Wasn't the knives what you were after?"

The immortal sorcerer looked at the reflection of the moon, then waved a hand vaguely.

"We can deal with them when the time comes. Things will sort themselves out, one way or another."

He remained silent for a bit, and then added, his smile slowly disappearing:

"Now that the One in the North is dead, things will start moving faster. The other Chain Lords are probably already in motion."

Noctis sighed, then leaned back and looked up at the sky.

"We won't have as much time to prepare as I would have hoped. Two months, perhaps… maybe even less. You and your friends should

spend that time wisely. Once the end starts, we won't have an opportunity to relax like this until it's all over."

Sunny grew silent, then looked at the tranquil lake. After a few moments, he said:

"We will help you, but I have some questions."

Amused by that statement, Noctis laughed.

"You even have questions on a night like this? Sunless… you should learn how to enjoy yourself, from time to time. Take a moment and appreciate the world. Otherwise, what is the point in living?"

Sunny glanced at him with a deadpan expression.

"Do I look like someone who knows what the point of living is? Thanks for the advice, I'll take your words to heart. However, I still have questions."

The sorcerer made a dour face and sighed.

"...Alright. One question. I'll answer one question. So think well before asking it!"

Sunny did not speak for a while, staring at the reflection of the moon. His face grew serious, deep shadows veiling his eyes.

After several minutes spent in silence, he finally frowned, looked at Noctis, and said:

"...Then tell me this one thing. Why did Sun God destroy Hope's Kingdom?"

The immortal raised his eyebrows, then threw his head back and laughed.

"By the Moon… of all the questions in the world, you just had to ask this one, didn't you!"

He shook his head, and then looked away.

"Well, a deal is a deal. I'll answer... like many others who tried to answer this question over the centuries. Some said that it was because she was a daemon, others said that it was because she was too powerful. That she had grown too prideful, or that she had grown too radiant, outshining even the Lord of Light. But they were all wrong.

In truth… at least what I think is the truth… Hope wasn't punished because she was too powerful, too prideful, or too radiant."

He remained silent for a few moments, and then sighed.

"...It was because she was worshipped."

# Chapter-691: Heresy

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, absorbing what Noctis had told him. The Altar Island was calm and tranquil, the lake surrounding it shimmering in the darkness with the reflected moonlight. The branches of the ancient tree swayed gently above his head.

'Because she was worshipped…'

He snorted and looked away, feeling bitterly disappointed, for some reason. After a while, he said darkly:

"So, what? That is all there is? Sun God was jealous?"

The sorcerer glanced at him, lingered for a moment, and then slowly shook his head.

"No… no, he wasn't."

Noctis remained silent for a bit, then sighed.

"The gods had never shown any animosity toward daemons. In fact, their relationship was somewhat friendly. In the battles of the ancient times, they even fought side by side as allies."

He frowned.

"Neither had the gods ever cared about whom or what the mortals worshipped. Ah, there were all kinds of silly cults before! There were rulers that proclaimed themselves divine, people who built temples to beasts and spirits… some oddballs even worshipped rocks. Or the Corrupted abominations… by the Moon, can you imagine? But the gods did not mind at all."

The sorcerer glanced up at the sky, thought for a bit, and then said

somberly:

"However, people had never worshipped a daemon… before Hope. The daemons, you see, are elusive and solitary creatures by nature. There is the eldest, mysterious Weaver — the Demon of Fate, who is shrouded in countless layers of lies. Then there is the youngest, Nether — the Demon of Destiny, who secluded himself in the darkness of the Underworld.

There is the Demon of Oblivion, whose name is long forgotten…"

Sunny listened attentively, absorbing the new information. Already accustomed to wielding the emerald medallion, he reflexively let go of the beautiful stone and allowed it to hang from the chain wrapped around his fingers, so that his thoughts remained private.

'Huh… so the Prince of the Underworld was actually called Nether? I wonder which came first, the name or the title… and he was also the Demon of Destiny, it seems. Wait, aren't fate and destiny the same thing? I guess they're not… the rune for destiny can also mean choice, after all… so, was he actually the Demon of Choice?'

His thoughts were interrupted by the sorcerer's wistful voice:

"...and the rest, each a personification of calamity and disaster. Mysterious, distant, and terrifying, each and every one of them. Or at least they were, until the Demon of Desire decided to come and live among us mortals, becoming known as Hope. She built her kingdom here, and soon, people learned to love her. And not long after that, they started to worship her."

Noctis paused and then continued, his face growing darker:

"And that was when we learned that while the gods were friendly to daemons and indifferent to mortals building temples to beasts, spirits, and rocks… they would not allow a daemon to be worshipped. They were so unwilling, in fact, that the Lord of Light brought down his flames upon the mortal realm, obliterating a whole chunk of it."

Sunny frowned, feeling a cold sense of dread permeate his heart. Remembering one of his nightmares, he shivered.

"...But why?"

The sorcerer looked at him with a bit of surprise and shrugged.

"Who knows? I guess only the gods do… well, and maybe a daemon or two. I doubt that even Hope knew what she had done wrong... but maybe she does, now. In any case, after her imprisonment, slowly, the idea of worshipping a daemon became tantamount to heresy."

Noctis suddenly laughed.

"What a strange word, heresy! Don't you think? It had not even existed when I was young, you know. But then, suddenly, each of the six cults started treating daemon worshippers as criminals, pests who were spreading a vile disease... and the concept of heresy was invented. Now, becoming a heretic means being hunted down and saying goodbye to your life…"

He grew silent, and then sighed.

"...We did not know it at the time, of course, but the destruction of the Kingdom of Hope was a turning point in history. With it, the Age of Heroes ended, and the current one — whatever it will be called one day — began. Ah, what a dreadful era! Nothing has gone right from then on…"

Sunny remained silent for a while, thinking that there was something strange about this whole story. Nothing made sense… the gods and the daemons had been allies once?

Knowing that they would eventually clash in a devastating war, he could not quite believe it… however, on second thought, the Prince of the Underworld… Nether… was indeed described as having been close with the Goddess of the Black Skies once.

Who was to say that the other daemons had not consorted with the gods, as well?

But that only made the divine punishment that the Lord of Light had brought down upon the Kingdom of Hope more inexplicable and strange. And who had they been allied together against? The creatures of the Void? What was the exact timeline of all this

convoluted nonsense? The Age of Heroes had ended with the imprisonment of Hope… but when had it started? And what had been happening before?

'Damn, so many questions…'

Sunny glanced at Noctis, hesitated for a few moments, and then grasped the emerald amulet again…

However, the sorcerer was having none of it. He glanced at Sunny and said with a smile:

"...I feel like you are about to ask me a question. That would be the second question… wait, no, the second one was whether or not Sun God was jealous! Wicked demon… you tricked me!"

Noctis shook his head, looked at Sunny with reproach, and stood up.

"Shame on you, Sunless! Good night. Tell your friends to prepare well in the time that we have left…"

With that, the sorcerer gave him another hurt look, then turned away and started walking back toward his residence.

After a few steps, however, he stopped and said in his usual carefree manner:

"Oh, yes… I almost forgot… you will have to go and retrieve the third knife, too. Don't worry, though, it is not going to be hard. Rather easy, really..."

Sunny, who was staring at the tranquil lake with a dark expression, simply nodded.

"Sure… wait, what? Why do we have to do it?! Go and get it yourself!"

Noctis hesitated for a bit, then sighed.

"Ah, I wish that I could. But… well… I might have said some nonsense about how my friend should only give the knife to someone of pure thought and heart… or something like that. And sadly, while

I am the most outstanding person in all of the Kingdom of Hope in many regards… uh… purity is not my strong suit. You and your friends, however! You reek of purity… well, one or two of you, at least… for now…"

With that, the sorcerer winked at Sunny and strolled away, whistling a jovial tune.

Sunny watched him go, and then shook his head with a bewildered expression on his face.

'Wait… did he just… swindle me into getting another knife for him? Again?!'

He blinked a couple of times and clenched his four fists.

'...Damnation!'

# Chapter-692: Free Time

After their conversation under that full moon, Noctis had secluded himself in his residence for a couple of weeks. Sunny tried to talk with the eccentric sorcerer a few times, but the silent Sailor Dolls refused to open the door and just stared at him with their crude wooden faces.

There was, of course, the option of simply using Shadow Step to get inside… but, somehow, Sunny suspected that intruding upon the immortal Transcendent would not have been the best idea. There were real souls trapped inside these Sailor Dolls, after all.

In the end, he and the other members of the cohort had no choice but to follow the advice Noctis gave him — to rest and prepare for what was about to come. Luckily, there were a lot of preparations they had to do.

While all four had trained themselves extensively before entering the Nightmare, many things happened since then. There were a lot of lessons they had learned in these three terrible months, most of them bringing the four Awakened to the very door of death.

Now that they had time, they could go over everything they had learned, revisit it, and truly absorb it into their bones, connecting the new knowledge and skills to their foundation in a solid manner.

For Sunny, that meant several things.

The first one was Shadow Dance. He had found himself in a strange situation, having made the recent breakthrough inside of a nightmare... that he did not really remember.

Sunny could guess that mastering the third step of his battle style was tied to the fact that he had lived through countless nightmares and lost himself in them, becoming truly shapeless and formless…

forgetting himself and turning into other people completely.

That observation was in line with how he had initially made progress to the third step of Shadow Step, back in the arena of the Red Colosseum, where he shadowed numerous Nightmare Creatures. Back then, he had almost lost himself, as well, but stopped at the last moment, fearing that he would not be able to come back.

Being trapped in the nightmares had made that frightening step for him, and so, he had approached the very edge of a breakthrough. The final piece of the puzzle had been trying to shadow the epitome of formlessness — another Shadow, Nightmare.

As a result of the breakthrough, Sunny's ability to recognize and gain insight into patterns of combat techniques had increased even more, now allowing him to understand and predict not only the movements and behavior of his enemies, but also intricately sense the flow of essence through their bodies, as well as — almost, but not quite — being able to predict their very thoughts.

However, there was one glaring flaw in this miraculous ability, one that he didn't know how to solve. For the first time since Sunny had created Shadow Dance, the elusive battle art was starting to seem… dangerous. Not only for his enemies, but also for himself.

What was the point of being able to kill something if he ran the risk of losing himself and becoming that thing forever?

To kill a dragon, one had to become a dragon...

Why would anyone want to achieve such a victory, if earning it meant ceasing to be themselves and becoming the very thing they had wanted to destroy?

For now, he didn't have a solution, and that made him more than a little bit nervous. So, Sunny decided to temporarily concentrate on other things.

He spent a large part of his days practicing archery with Kai. Sunny quickly realized that he would never be as talented of an archer as his friend was, but that did not mean that he could not achieve great

results. In fact, his aim and skill with the bow were increasing at a steady pace.

Still, there was a question of distributing the tools the cohort possessed in the most efficient manner, so Sunny reluctantly tried to lend Morgan's Warbow to Kai. It was for naught, though — because of the [Unbending] enchantment of the bow, his friend was simply not strong enough to draw it.

When their training sessions were over, Sunny would usually return to his room and spent the rest of the day fruitlessly practicing weaving. He had achieved some progress in his attempt to learn how to copy enchantments, but not enough to make the altered weaves stable.

The number of Memories he had won in the Red Colosseum was dwindling by the day with no apparent result, which made Sunny very frustrated.

It seemed that he had hit a bottleneck in his understanding of how spellweaves were supposed to work, and was in need of a mental breakthrough to push himself any further.

That breakthrough was not in a hurry to come, though.

…When the day was over and darkness encroached upon the world, Sunny turned to the third, and most time-consuming, part of his preparations… collecting shadow fragments to form his fourth core. Leaving the Sanctuary, he would travel to nearby islands in search of Nightmare Creatures to hunt, and killed those he could find and that were not beyond his ability to defeat.

By now, less than one hundred and fifty fragments separated him from becoming a Devil. The number seemed so small, but at the same time was more troublesome than it should have been.

The problem was in the fact that there were not as many Nightmare Creatures in the Kingdom of Hope as there had been on the Chained Isles in the future, especially not that close to the stronghold of one of the Chain Lords. As the result, his progress was torturously slow and tedious.

To accelerate it somehow, Sunny had made a frightening decision to leave the surface of the islands and take his hunting to their underside, where the true horrors of this land dwelled. Luckily, his new body was somewhat fit to do so — with his sharp claws and talons, he was able to climb any surface, no matter how steep, or even remain mobile while hanging entirely upside down.

And if he made a mistake, the Heavenly Burden was always at hand.

In combination with his swiftly improving archery skill and determination to form a new core before the culmination of the Nightmare arrived, Sunny was able to slay many dwellers of the Dark Side. There were indeed terrible and morbid creatures, and more than a few left scars on his body.

But it was still not fast enough.

By the end of the first two weeks, he was still not even halfway to his goal. And on that day, quietly and without any fanfare, something else happened.

Somewhere out there, in the wild reaches of the Dream Realm…

Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan had finally become a Tyrant.

# Chapter-693: Knowledge of Everything

Sunny was in his room, watching as a Memory disintegrated into a whirlwind of shimmering sparks, a dark expression on his face. He didn't need the Spell to inform him to know that he had just lost another one…

And yet, the ever-helpful Spell still whispered into his ear:

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

Sunny snarled, then shook his head bitterly and summoned the runes, intending to check on how many expendable Memories he still had left. It was then that he decided to check on Neph's progress, which had long ago become a deeply ingrained habit of his.

Seeing that Changing Star was still alive and fighting brought him both relief and grim motivation.

Already sensing what he was about to see, Sunny stared at the runes and read:

Name: Nephis.

True Name: Changing Star.

Rank: Dreamer.

Class: Tyrant.

Soul Cores: [5/7].

Soul Fragments: [0/5000].

He looked at the runes for some time, then sighed and dismissed

them.

Just a few days ago, she was still far away from reaching the fifth core. After the Red Colosseum and his battle with Nightmare, the gap between them had shortened even more… but now, Neph had gone and done something crazy again, making it grow vast and infuriating once more.

He stared at the walls of his room darkly. It was as though the two of them were constantly playing an insane game of tug of war, fully knowing that one wrong move meant death, but equally unwilling to let the opponent win.

And from the very start of it, he had never been in the lead.

'How… tiresome.'

Sunny shook his head, realizing that he was in no mood to blindly throw himself at the impregnable barrier of weaving anymore. At least not today.

…His solemn mood changed, however, when the shadows he had stationed across from the sorcerer's door saw it open, and the familiar figure walk out, then wince at the bright sun.

Noctis looked a bit disheveled, with dark circles under his eyes and slightly messy hair. Considering who it was, though, Sunny could only guess whether the immortal was tired, or just hungover.

Still, this wasn't a chance he was ready to miss.

Wasting some essence to step through the shadows, Sunny appeared a few meters away from Noctis and looked at him with a guarded expression. The sorcerer blinked a couple of times, then put on a friendly smile:

"Sunless… you are still here? Haven't we just talked?"

Sunny inwardly rolled his eyes.

"...That was two weeks ago. Fifteen days, technically."

Noctis raised an eyebrow, shifted from foot to foot awkwardly, and then cleared his throat.

"Oh… really? I, uh… well, what a nice day! Can I help you with something, then?"

Sunny stared at the sorcerer for a few moments, then nodded.

"Yes. Yes, in fact, you can."

The immortal Transcendent smiled brightly.

"Well, why didn't you say so! We are friends, are we not, and friends are supposed to help each other… so, what do you need?"

Sunny gripped the emerald amulet tighter, hesitated for a second, and then said:

"...Can you teach me sorcery?"

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Noctis continued to smile for a bit, then laughed.

"That's it? Sure, no problem. I am the greatest sorcerer in the Kingdom of Hope, after all! Under my guidance, you will become a distinguished sorcerer yourself in no time. Let me think… if we start right now…"

As Sunny smiled tentatively, he looked at the sky to gauge the time of day, thought for a bit, and then added:

"...we'll be finished at about the same time, a hundred years from now. Let us start!"

Sunny blinked.

"What? A hundred years?!"

The sorcerer frowned a little, then shrugged.

"Well, maybe two hundred years. That was how long it took me to learn the basics… if you mean true sorcery, of course, not those

pitiful tricks others consider to be miracles. Uh, actually… what do you think sorcery is?"

Sunny hesitated, then said with uncertainty:

"The ability to manipulate magical energies through means that fall outside one's Aspect?"

Noctis stared at him for a bit, then sighed.

"A good enough answer, but no. Simply put, there is no such thing as sorcery. Or rather, there is no single thing called sorcery. But there are various ways to twist the underlying laws of the world to produce some effect, desirable or not. What we call sorcery is just a… a structured method of achieving a predictable result while doing so, with whatever means you possess.

Usually with the help of soul essence."

He looked around, observing the landscape of the Sanctuary, and added:

"...Take me, for example. My Aspect has to do with souls, and so, I was able to learn a few things from the followers of Heart God — the God of Souls, as well as emotions, memory, hunger, and growth. However, I only became a true sorcerer after learning Hope's magic."

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"Hope's… magic?"

Noctis nodded.

"Ah, yes. The most common type of sorcery used by mortals — blindly and without a true understanding of its nature, I might add — comes from Hope. She is the one who invented writing, after all, and gifted it to us humans. What a wonderful invention it was! Writing itself does not produce sorcery, though."

He hesitated, and then added:

"Before Hope invented writing, the most common type of sorcery

used by mortals, even more blindly, was the Sorcery of Names. You see, Sunless, everything that exists has a name. In fact, you might even say that a thing only starts to exist after it is given a name. A flower is just a flower, one among many, until you call it a rose.

Then, roses are suddenly different from all the other flowers, and so, they come to exist."

Sunny frowned, not sure that he understood what the hell Noctis was talking about. Wouldn't roses exist even if they were not called roses? Well… in a sense, they wouldn't? Flowers that looked like roses would, but they would not be called roses, and so, there would not be roses…

'How confusing…'

The sorcerer, meanwhile, ignored his befuddlement and continued:

"However, not all names are equal. Some are simply given and aren't worth much, while others have to be earned… and those names, the true names of things, hold power over them. Names are a powerful thing, Sunless… and so, a long time ago, people who learned those names could share in that power.

However, their authority was obscure and fleeting, since it was only invoked when someone said the names aloud… and saying them with a mortal mouth was not an easy feat."

He suddenly smiled.

"But that was what made Hope's invention so ingenious, you see! Once writing appeared, one with enough knowledge could connect the names to material objects, granting the invocation permanence. Of course, it is not that simple… in fact, knowing the names of things and how to shape them into songs and phrases is incredibly hard, because with the knowledge of names comes the knowledge of everything."

Noctis let out a heavy sigh.

"Simply scribbling a rune without understanding its meaning would not do anything. So, it takes centuries to learn the very basics of

runic sorcery. Unless you are intrinsically predisposed to it, of course… which no one is, except for Hope herself. But I will gladly teach you everything I know! If you have a century or two to spare, I mean..."

The sorcerer smiled brightly and stared at Sunny, sincerity written all other his obnoxiously beautiful face.

'That slimy bastard…'

Of course, Sunny did not have a couple of centuries to spare.

But… maybe… he didn't need to.

'Names are a powerful thing…'

Suddenly, a seed of an idea appeared in his mind.

"I… uh… maybe some other time."

Noctis sighed with regret and opened his mouth to say something… but the four-armed demon was already gone, swallowed by shadows.

The sorcerer stared at the shadows with a sour face, then shook his head and sighed again.

"What a strange fellow…"

# Chapter-694: Key Piece

Back in the Red Colosseum, Sunny had spent an excruciating amount of time remembering and comparing the weaves of different Memories in order to understand what they had in common.

In his mind, there were three traits that all Memories shared: the ability to be summoned and dismissed, the ability to repair themselves while dismissed, and the connection to the wielder's soul.

By recognizing these three universal parts of the weave patterns, he thought that he had learned how to reproduce these simplest enchantments, at least to the point where he managed to create a simple pattern that allowed an item to be dismissed and summoned from essence.

…However, there was a fourth quality that all Memories shared, one that he had not thought about.

All Memories had a name.

'I am an idiot… such an idiot…'

He of all people should have known what power names wielded, considering that his own True Name was literally the key to having absolute control over him.

Appearing from the shadows that nestled in his room, Sunny fell on the bed and summoned the Silver Bell — the Memory with which he was familiar the most. He had spent countless hours studying its weave and trying to comprehend the secrets of how it worked… to little avail, up until now.

Staring beneath the surface of the small bell, he saw the beautiful and complicated pattern of ethereal strings that permeated it, with a single dimly glowing ember in its middle.

By now, Sunny had managed to recognize the parts of the weave that were responsible for all its unique qualities… or so he thought.

There were the three segments of the pattern that he had learned in the Red Colosseum, and the rest was the single enchantment of the bell. However, despite knowing all the parts, Sunny could never make sense of the whole weave… as though something was missing, making all his attempts to comprehend the logic and connections of the ethereal strings useless.

'There is one more element… the Silver Bell does have only a single enchantment, but it also has a name… the name that differentiates it from every other Memory, and thus, allows it to exist… somehow.'

Sunny stared at the part of the weave that he had thought was representing the enchantment for a long time, then summoned another Memory and studied it, as well. The task of separating one completely unique part of the weave from another completely unique part seemed impossible, at first… after all, he had nothing to use as a reference.

But he had something even better. The intrinsic predisposition to weaving that he had inherited from the Demon of Fate… the very quality that Noctis had mentioned Hope possessed when it came to runic sorcery, as its creator.

Sunny, of course, was no Weaver. But he was able to intuitively sense the purpose of spellweave elements due to his connection to the enigmatic daemon. That talent was literally in his blood. All Sunny had to do now… was carefully examine each and every string comprising the vast pattern, and sense which ones were meant to create sound, and which had no purpose he knew of.

The ones he knew nothing about had to do something with the name.

…Hours passed, and soon, it grew dark outside. Sunny continued to stare at the small silver bell, forgetting about his nightly hunt. And at some point in the middle of the night, his eyes suddenly widened.

'There… is it? Yes! I see it!'

Finally, he had managed to isolate the part of the weave that had nothing to do with the three universal enchantments, but also didn't seem to be connected to the actual purpose of the bell — producing a ringing that could be heard from kilometers away.

This… this had to be the part of the spellweave that described the name of the Memory. Such a vast and intricate pattern of ethereal strings, all to express two simple words…

Silver Bell.

As soon as Sunny mentally connected these two words with the pattern, a strange thing happened. The weave of the Silver Bell remained the same, but he suddenly saw it differently. It was as though the whole thing completely transformed in front of his eyes, while not changing at all.

The disparate parts suddenly seemed harmoniously connected, and the chaotic and senseless structure of the weave suddenly appeared to possess a strange and mysterious, but elegant and undeniable logic.

He was stunned.

'How… how did I not see this?'

The pattern was suddenly so much more open to him, so much easier to discern. And in the middle of it, weaving through every part of the tapestry of ethereal strings was the name, Silver Bell, which served as the bridge and the unifying element between them.

'...No wonder every Memory I tried to modify collapsed. I only missed the most important thing, damn!'

Sunny studied the weave of the Silver Bell with wide eyes, seeing the familiar parts of it in a new light.

…Then, however, a slight frown appeared on his face.

'Wait… what is that?'

Now that he saw the entirety of the logic behind the pattern — or rather, of the logic behind its foundational structure — he could also

see an element that seemed alien to his understanding. By now, no part of this weave was supposed to remain unknown to him.

And yet, there was one.

More than that, that part of the weave was vast and terribly complicated, as much inherent to the whole structure of the Memory as its name. It was hard to notice at first, but if one knew what to look for, it was almost impossible to ignore.

'Huh… it is very pretty… but what the hell is it?'

He scowled, then glanced at the other Memory, wishing to compare its weave to that of the Silver Bell.

To Sunny's surprise, the vast and beautiful underlying pattern was there, as well, its presence as strange and unexplainable as before.

Suddenly tense, he summoned all of his Memories one after another, studying them… and finding the mysterious pattern everywhere!

'What the hell is it?!'

Sunny had no idea, and even his intuition was silent, not providing any hint as to the purpose of the everpresent hidden weave. The only clue he found was that a part of it bore a distant resemblance to the weave of the Moonlight Shard, and that its overall structure slightly resembled that of the name of the Silver Bell. However, the mysterious pattern was incomparably vaster and… deeper.

He scowled, and then suddenly tilted his head with a surprised expression.

"Moonlight… light…"

Sunny glanced at the weave again, and then froze.

"...Lost from Light?"

# Chapter-695: Sonorous Silver Bell

…When morning came, Sunny was sitting on the floor with a wild look on his bestial face, his black coarse hair in a mess. There was a glowing golden needle in one of his hands and a small silver bell in the other. The other two held a flute that seemed to be either cut from jade or made out of polished emerald bone.

That was probably the best Memory he had received in the Red Colosseum… but right now, Sunny couldn't care about the flute any less.

Instead, all his attention was concentrated on the small bell.

Holding his breath, Sunny raised and shook it. However, instead of the clear ringing that would be heard from kilometers away, all he heard was a barely audible, melodious whisper.

A wild grin slowly appeared on his face, illuminating his face.

"I've... I've done it. I really did!"

Barely containing his excitement, Sunny summoned the runes and read the description of the bell:

Memory: Silver Bell.

Memory Rank: Dormant.

Memory Tier: II.

Memory Description: [A small memento of a long-lost home, which once brought its owner comfort and joy. Its clear ringing can be heard from miles away].

Memory Enchantments: [Silver Song], [Sonorous].

[Silver Song] Enchantment Description: "The ringing of this bell is not overly loud, but can be heard across a vast distance."

[Sonorous] Enchantment Description: "The owner can decide how loud this bell will ring."

Sunny's eyes glistened with joy.

Of course, these two enchantments were not that powerful. However, that did not matter… what mattered was the fact that there were now two of them, despite that there had only been one before.

He had finally managed to successfully copy and transplant an enchantment, albeit a simple one. He had studied the emerald bone flute, painstakingly recreated the weave of the [Sonorous] Enchantment, and integrated it into the weave of the Silver Bell… without destroying it. He had done it! He added a new enchantment to a Memory!

Failing to wipe the wide grin from his face, Sunny looked beneath the surface of the small bell. Now, its spellweave looked… very different.

Where there had once only been strings of ethereal light, now there were black strings made of shadows, as well. The two types of strings were intricately intertwined to create a complicated, and yet harmonious pattern.

More than that, the pattern of the Silver Bell used to have only one glowing ember that served as a nexus for the ethereal threads... but now, there were two — knowing that an additional enchantment would require a more powerful foundation, Sunny had used one of the soul shards in his possession to create a new anchor.

All of this had only been possible because of his new insight into the structure of weaves. Knowing that the name of a Memory was integral to its spellweave allowed Sunny to see the pattern as a whole, and so, he was finally able to change it without destroying the thing entirely.

Of course, he was still unable to even think about creating an

enchantment of his own… but taking an already existing enchantment pattern and transplanting it into a different Memory was not outside of the realm of possibility for him anymore. Granted, it was not an easy process… just the simple [Sonorous] enchantment took a whole night and an ocean of shadow essence to create.

And that was after he had spent months staring at the Silver Bell and studying its spellweave.

But, still…

'Gods!'

The possibilities… were almost infinite. The ability to modify and change his Memories could open countless doors for him, in time… and that was only scratching the surface of his recent breakthrough.

Just the fact that he had been able to raise the Tier of the Silver Bell by adding an additional anchor was already promising enough.

Yes, it would take a lot of time and effort to solidify this success and learn how to copy enchantments faster and more reliably. There would be plenty of failures along the way…

But the more Sunny practiced, the more he would come to know about the logic and essence of weaving. One day in the future, he would gain enough knowledge and experience to take the next step and learn how to modify and change the enchantments themselves, altering their function.

And one day after that, far in the future, he just might learn enough to try creating an enchantment — and a Memory — of his own.

On the day he succeeded in that daunting endeavor…

On that day, Sunny would earn the right to call himself a true sorcerer.

...On that day, he would become a weaver.

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Much later, Sunny emerged from his room, stared at the bright sun with a dissatisfied expression, yawned, and walked toward the spot where he and Kai usually practiced archery.

His friend was already there, wearing his charred wooden mask. There was a bow in his hands, and a quiver of arrows by his feet.

Noticing the four-armed demon, Kai turned his head and waved, greeting him.

"Good morning!"

Sunny rubbed his face, then revealed his sharp fangs in a frightening smile.

"...What's good about it? Ah, doesn't matter. Shall we start?"

The young man looked at him for a bit, then shrugged.

"Sure. But where have you been these last few days?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"In my room? Wait, a few days passed? Huh… I must have lost track of time…"

Kai tilted his head, then suddenly glanced at Sunny's hands:

"Oh… wait. Where is that emerald amulet Noctis gave you?"

Sunny glanced down with a guilty look, lingered for a bit, and answered reluctantly:

"Oh… that thing… I, uh, sort of broke it."

The young man's eyes widened.

"You broke… wait, then how am I hearing you?!"

At that moment, Sunny grinned and produced a simple-looking rock from the folds of his black kimono, then proudly presented it to Kai.

The archer stared at it with confusion:

"Is it… the Ordinary Rock?"

Continuing to grin, Sunny shook his head. Then, the rock suddenly spoke in his voice:

"It was. But now… it is the Extraordinary Rock! I… improved it, I guess. Now, it can do the same thing as the amulet, but as an active enchantment. So, no more blurting random thoughts for me! What a relief… I can curse out anyone I want in peace again… uh, I mean, can have some mental privacy again.

It can also be really, really loud. So, its name changed as well."

Kai stared at him in bewilderment for a bit, then shook his head.

"Well… this is great! But, sadly, we don't have time to discuss it in detail… or practice archery, for that matter."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Really? Why?"

The young man sighed, then stood up and picked up his quiver.

"It's Noctis… he wants to see us."

# Chapter-696: Extraordinary Rock

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then sighed and followed Kai through the garden. He felt a little uneasy about meeting Noctis…

'Surely, he won't be mad at me for breaking his amulet… well, who cares, anyway? That slick bastard owes me too much, already…'

Destroying the emerald amulet had not been his plan. Sunny just really, really wanted to find a more efficient method of expressing himself, and the sorcerer's gift was the only thing in his possession that had a suitable enchantment.

The problem was that the enchantment was made with runes, and not a weave. So Sunny had no way to reproduce it.

…He could, however, try to turn the amulet into a Memory.

Sunny had already achieved something similar back in the Red Colosseum by weaving a basic enchantment of summoning into his slave collar. However, the process had never been completed, because the enchantment was destroyed in the clash with the collar's own magic, lasting only long enough to allow him to escape the cage.

Now, however, Sunny had plenty of time to make another attempt.

This time, armed with his new knowledge, he had a far better chance of success. Of course, it was not guaranteed, so he started by experimenting with a beautifully crafted wooden chair in his room.

Slowly and tediously, he created countless strings of the essence and weaved the three basic enchantments into the piece of furniture… only to see them — and the soul shard he had used as an anchor —

disintegrate into a rain of ethereal sparks.

After thinking for a while and replenishing his essence, Sunny repeated the process, but this time with one additional step. He also weaved his True Name into the pattern, using it as the beacon for the enchantment that was responsible for connecting the Memory to the owner's soul.

And so, the chair… became a Memory, of sorts.

Now, there was a [???] in the list of Memories he owned, with a description that stated "This chair was turned into a Memory by Lost from Light... for reasons unknown". The chair could be summoned and dismissed at will, and even repaired itself while stored within his soul.

It could also be fed to Saint, increasing her shadow fragment count by half a point — since the single soul shard Sunny had used to create the weave was of the Awakened rank.

Satisfied with that, Sunny waited for his cores to regenerate enough essence, and repeated the process once again, now with the emerald amulet itself.

Sadly, the result… was not the same.

He did manage to make the amulet into a Memory. What was more, in the process, the Spell itself transformed the enchantment of the amulet from runic to a weave, showing just how ingenious Weaver's creation was.

However, the resulting pattern turned out to be unstable. Perhaps because of the alien nature of the amulet's magic, or perhaps because Sunny did not know its name, or how to name it using strings, it began to slowly unravel almost immediately after the transformation. All Sunny could do was feverishly study the weave of the swiftly decaying Memory before it completely fell apart.

Soon, the amulet destroyed itself.

But Sunny still managed to copy its enchantment onto the Ordinary Rock, as well as adding a new anchor to the weave of the Rock, thus

elevating it to the Second Tier. He also went ahead and copied the [Sonorous] enchantment onto it, as well.

When he did, the name of the Memory changed, and the Ordinary Rock… became the Extraordinary Rock.

Overall, Sunny was very pleased with himself — not only because he managed to recreate another enchantment and confirm his ability to turn soul shards into food for his Shadows, but also because he would finally be able to speak his mind… without speaking everything that was on his mind in the process.

Gods knew he needed that!

The only bad thing about the whole situation was that Noctis's gift was destroyed. But, with some luck, the sorcerer would not even notice…

'Whatever…'

They met Effie near the wooden door. By now, the little girl's bruises had healed, and she looked like a vigorous, healthy child again.

...She was also gnawing on a large bone with a wild look on her face, seemingly making even the Sailor Dolls a bit nervous.

Noticing the two of them, Effie smiled.

"There you are!"

Kai greeted her, and then asked:

"Where's Cassie?"

The little girl swung her bone, pointing at the flying ship that hovered above the Sanctuary.

"There. Noctis is, too. Let's go?"

With that, she swallowed the remains of the bone and raised her hands, as if asking for a hug.

Kai sighed, then picked her up and flew into the sky. Sunny grimaced, summoned the Heavenly Burden, and followed.

Soon, they landed on the deck of the ship and found Cassie there, already waiting for them. The sorcerer was some distance away, watering the sacred tree.

The sight of him with a watering pot in hand was so mundane that it almost looked comical.

The members of the cohort approached Noctis and then stopped, waiting respectfully for him to notice them.

…After a while, Sunny cleared his throat.

Some time later, he growled loudly.

Finally, the sorcerer flinched, then turned around and smiled.

"Oh! You are finally here."

Sunny nodded, then asked cautiously:

"We are. What did you want to talk about?"

Noctis scratched his chin, then sighed.

"Well… it's time for the four of you to go and retrieve the Ruby Knife. It is not too far from here, being kept by a friend of mine. The whole trip should not take you more than a couple of days."

'...Sounds like another disaster.'

Sunny frowned, hesitated for a second, and then said:

"And what exactly do we need to do to get the knife from your… friend?"

Noctis blinked a couple of times, a confused look on his face.

"Oh… nothing? Just go there and tell her to give you the knife. As long as at least one of you is pure… in heart and thought… she will."

'Can't be that easy… and what does being pure even mean?'

Sunny wanted to ask a few questions, but then changed his mind. Speaking with Noctis more than absolutely necessary was… troublesome. It was also fruitless, since Noctis only ever revealed as much information as he wanted, and never more than that.

So, he simply said:

"And where does that friend of yours reside?"

The immortal Transcendent smiled, then conjured a map of the Kingdom of Hope from somewhere and pointed to a particular island.

"Here! See… it's really close…"

Sunny looked at where the sorcerer's manicured finger pointed… and paled.

He knew that island pretty well.

It was the island of the tranquil, clear lake that he had been advised to never approach… because the creature living in the lake was so terrifying that even Sky tide did not dare to venture there.

The creature was surely Corrupted, and as for its Rank, no one even had a guess.

Rattled, he glanced at Noctis with a dark expression and growled.

"Are you joking? There's a terrible, unsightly thing living in that lake!"

The sorcerer looked at him with reproach, and then said bitterly:

"Well… that unsightly thing is my friend. Shame on you, Sunless. Of all the creatures in the world, I thought that you would be the last to judge someone on their appearance… after all, you are a terrible and unsightly thing yourself… and yet, we are best friends…"

# Chapter-697: Friendly Visit

Sunny stared at the sorcerer for a few moments, unamused. He really wanted to retort… but couldn't. The four-armed demon was indeed a fearsome and unsightly creature, as far as humans were concerned. So, denying it would have been a lie.

And while the Extraordinary Rock could repeat his thoughts, the thoughts it spoke aloud still had to be truthful.

With an irritated snarl, Sunny looked away and said:

"Fine. We will retrieve the Ruby Knife from your friend that lives in the lake. However… it would only be polite for you to return the favor and give us something in return, don't you think? To avoid putting a strain on our own friendship, you know…"

These were more or less the exact words Noctis had used to lure him into a confrontation with Nightmare, so Sunny was pretty sure that the sorcerer would not be able to refuse his request.

Indeed, the immortal looked at him with a pale smile, and then let out a slightly nervous laugh.

"Oh… yes, you are right, of course… huh… is there something particular you have in mind?"

Sunny nodded.

"As a matter of fact, I do."

With that, he pulled an amulet in the form of an anvil from the folds of his kimono and handed it to Noctis. This was the charm Master Welthe had worn in the Night Temple to protect herself from Mordret… after her death, the small talisman remained in his possession, revealing that it was not a Memory, but an actual object.

Considering its shape and the fame of the great clan Valor, especially when it came to forging weapons and tools, it was not hard to imagine how the charm came to be. However… that did not mean that Sunny understood how it worked.

And he really, really needed to.

Cassie was immune to Mordret's possession due to her blindness, and Sunny himself was protected by the army of shadows contained within his soul. Kai and Effie, however… when he imagined his friends meeting the Prince of Nothing, his blood turned cold.

"I want you to make something similar to this."

Noctis received that talisman and studied it with a curious smile. Slowly, however, the smile disappeared from his face. His grey eyes glinted with a strange emotion, and he said in a neutral tone:

"...Where did you get this?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Off an enemy's corpse. Well… more or less. Why?"

The sorcerer studied the small anvil for a bit more, and then shook his head with a sigh.

"I, uh… can't recreate this talisman. The sorcery used to enchant it is not something I have ever seen before. More than that, it was made for a reason that eludes me, and by someone far more powerful than I am. Which is a real feat, mind you, considering how mighty and talented I am! In any case, I can't do it. Think of something else."

Noctis glanced at the anvil amulet with a frown, and then returned it to Sunny.

'Someone… far more powerful?'

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

Had Mordret's father created the talisman to ward off his son personally? Just how dreadful the Sovereigns were to impress even

an immortal Saint of the bygone era?

He lingered for a bit, then hid the little anvil and sighed.

"Alright then. I'll… think of something else. We will discuss it after the Ruby Knife is in our hands."

Noctis waved a hand and turned back to the sacred tree, then continued to water it.

"Fine, fine… just don't let your imagination run too wild. I am but a humble sorcerer, you know, not an actual deity… I only look like one... ah, yes, my heavenly beauty is indeed divine…"

Sunny sighed, then gestured to the other members of the cohort and turned around.

It was time to visit another of the humble sorcerer's friends.

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Four Awakened were walking across the giant chain that swayed lightly, suspended between two skies — one blue and full of light, the other black and devoid of it.

Well, to be more precise, only Sunny and Cassie were walking. Kai was levitating above the links of the ancient chain, while Effie was sitting comfortably on Sunny's shoulders. In fact, the little girl was fast asleep… and drooling on his head.

In other circumstances, Sunny would have been outraged and shaken the fiendish child awake, but right now, he was too preoccupied with grim thoughts.

He wasn't even thinking about the creature they were about to face… no, his mind was still on the anvil talisman.

Since Noctis was unable to create a second one, someone in their cohort was going to have to remain without any defense against the Prince of Nothing… and now, Sunny had to decide who.

Was he going to give the charm to Kai, or to Effie?

As if reading his thoughts, the little girl suddenly shifted, then yawned and opened her eyes.

"Gods, Sunny… stop grinding your fangs so loud, will you? I can't sleep! What has gotten you so tense, anyway?"

He hesitated for a few moments, then shared his concerns. Both Cassie and Kai listened, as well, their faces turning as grim as his own.

…Effie, however, seemed unconcerned.

"What, that's it? How is this a problem… just give it to Kai, you doofus."

Sunny jumped down to the next link, holding Effie's skinny legs to prevent her from falling off, and then asked:

"Aren't you afraid of being consumed by Mordret?"

The little girl grimaced.

"You guys overestimate that Mordret guy a lot. He's not that dangerous."

Everyone grew silent, looking at her with doubt. Not dangerous? The hundred Lost warriors, two Ascended knights, and the whole of the northern reach of the Kingdom of Hope begged to differ.

She shook her head.

"What made him dangerous were the six cores he possessed. Inside the Soul Sea, that guy can mirror the Aspect of his enemy, correct? He can use the same Abilities, but charge them with the power of multiple cores."

Effie snorted.

"Well, he doesn't have six cores anymore. He only has one… maybe two or three, if he was very diligent and managed to create new ones. Doesn't really matter. Point is, he sacrificed his personal power to create five mirror monsters, which made the overall threat he

represents far greater, but the danger to one's soul far lesser."

She thought for a bit, and then added thoughtfully:

"In fact, I would even say that what truly makes him dangerous are not his cores, but instead his skill and talent… his genius, even, when it comes to combat. The ability to mirror someone's Aspect sounds terrifying, but think about it… how long did it take you to get a grasp on how to properly use your Abilities?

That guy has to fight someone with their own Aspect seconds after coming in possession of it… which is not an easy feat."

The little girl yawned again, and then settled into a more comfortable position.

"...More than that, he also inherits the person's Flaw. So, actually, it's just a question of skill and experience… let him invade my Soul Sea… I'll teach him some manners…"

With that… Effie fell asleep once again.

Sunny remained silent for a bit, then sighed and handed the anvil amulet to Kai, who received it with a doubtful expression on his face.

Effie was not wrong… now that Mordret did not possess an overwhelming advantage in raw power, this facet of his Aspect was less dangerous. It all came down to the nature of the victim's Abilities and their skill.

Effie was far more skilled in combat than Kai was… more than that, her own Aspect was all about physical might and melee combat, and he had never seen anyone more comfortable in their physicality than Effie. Even Mordret would find it difficult to utilize her Aspect better...

But, still…

Looking ahead, he scowled and said:

"...Let's hope we won't have to find out whether you are right or not. There is still a chance that we will not become enemies with Mordret

in this Nightmare."

Effie shifted slightly, then said in a sleepy voice:

"Of course I'm right… now let me nap in peace…"

However, instead of doing that, Sunny shook her awake.

The little girl sighed with irritation.

"What?!"

He simply pointed forward.

"We're here."

…Just a hundred or so meters ahead, the slope of a flying island rose upward from the heavenly chain.

They had reached the tranquil lake.

# Chapter-698: Creature of the Lake

Sunny landed on the very edge of the island and froze there, looking forward with a dark expression on his bestial face. The others remained silent, too, feeling his unease and tension.

The land in front of them seemed tranquil… beautiful, even. There was an expanse of vibrant green grass, and some distance away, it made way for the calm waters of a vast lake. Its surface was perfectly still and reflective, making it seem as though a piece of the blue sky above had somehow gotten embedded into the ground.

A gentle wind caressed their faces, and nothing broke the peaceful silence except for the rustle of grass and the distant rattling of chains.

…And yet, Sunny couldn't help but feel a sense of imminent danger.

He sighed, and then glanced at his friends with uncertainty.

"...Should we summon our armor and weapons?"

Kai hesitated for a moment, then said:

"Wouldn't that be seen as a sign of distrust and hostility? Pure heart, pure thoughts… whatever that means… does not seem to fit with being armed and ready for a fight."

Sunny grimaced.

"Yeah… however, what if we do have to fight?"

Effie smiled.

"The four of us should be able to at least retreat safely, should things go wrong. I mean, how terrible can that thing be?"

Sunny shivered, then shook his head.

"Terrible enough for Saints to fear it. I've… I've been to this island a few times, in the future, but stuck to the edges, never approaching the lake. So I don't actually know what kind of a creature lives in its depths. However… I did see bones laying on the shore. And just those bones alone looked like they had belonged to things I would not want to meet."

He hesitated for a while, then glanced at Cassie.

"What do you think?"

The young woman tilted her head a little, then said calmly:

"I don't feel any danger. Maybe Noctis was honest, this time."

Sunny sighed. Cassie's intuition had guided each of them through countless dangers unscathed… if she felt that it was safe, there was a good reason to listen.

That didn't mean that he had to be happy about it, though.

"Alright… no weapons or armor, for now. Just... pure thoughts…"

Together, they crossed the stretch of land between the edge of the island and the shore of the lake, stopping just a few steps away from the calm water. Because of how still and reflective it was, no one could peer beneath the surface… however, Sunny could feel something deep beneath the water. A vast and sprawling shadow… ancient, deep… unfathomable…

He shivered.

Sunny lingered for a bit, then cleared his throat and, feeling extremely stupid, addressed the lake:

"Uh… I am here to retrieve the Ruby Knife. Please… give it to me?"

There was a gust of wind… and nothing happened.

'Is it… is it because of Harper? Or all the things I've done to survive

in the outskirts?'

A few moments later, Effie laughed.

"Oh… I guess you are not pure, Sunny… who would have thought!"

He gritted his teeth, then growled at her angrily.

"Go and try yourself, then!"

The little girl shook her head vigorously.

"No, no… no one has ever accused me of being pure, I think! Although…"

She thought for a bit, and then shrugged.

"I guess I am in the body of a child…"

The girl climbed down from Sunny's shoulders, approached the water, and stretched out a hand.

"Can I please have the knife, uh… Aunty from the lake?"

Once again, nothing happened. Effie remained there for a few moments, then sighed and took a step back.

"...Figures."

Finally, both of them turned and stared at Kai.

The young man hesitated for a few moments, then shook his head.

"I think Cassie should try."

Sunny and Effie glanced at each other, a little surprised, then shrugged and made way for the blind girl to approach the water. There was no harm in trying, anyway…

Cassie lingered for a few moments, then sighed and walked toward the shore. Stopping mere centimeters from the calm water, she lowered her head and said simply:

"I am here for the Ruby Knife."

At first, Sunny thought that she had failed as well… but then, the young woman suddenly paled and took a step back.

There was a ripple on the surface of the lake… and although the vast shadow hidden within it did not move, something suddenly appeared from beneath the water.

…A pale, white hand that held a long knife, which seemed to be made of solidified blood.

The hand rose from the water and offered it to Cassie, who suddenly trembled with her whole body and took another step back, shaking her head with a panicked look.

Then, however, she stopped. Her bloodless lips turned into a straight line, and, gritting her teeth, the young woman returned to the shore. There, she knelt and leaned forward, taking the Ruby Knife from the deathly white hand.

The hand let go of it easily and disappeared back into the water, and soon, nothing but a slowly dissipating ripple remained to remind them of its existence.

Sunny observed all of this in shock.

'It didn't move… the shadow did not even move…'

He was about to say something, but then, the water rippled again, and another hand emerged — this one black as coal and holding nothing. It slowly moved toward Cassie, then rose, and softly caressed her cheek. The young woman flinched when the black flesh touched her, but remained in place. A few seconds later, the black hand retreated back into the lake as well.

Cassie only moved when the ripples were gone, standing up and turning to them with a distant expression on her beautiful face. In the spot where the black hand touched her cheek, her skin turned grey and opened, drops of blood rolling down her chin.

She was holding the Ruby Knife in her trembling hands.

Sunny finally found himself able to speak:

"What… what the hell was that?"

Cassie remained motionless for a while, then suddenly shivered.

"I am… I don't know. Let's just get out of here. Please?"

He frowned, but did not object. To tell the truth, Sunny couldn't wait to get away from the lake himself.

As they were walking away, he briefly turned and looked at the tranquil water one last time.

Was it an illusion, or did the reflection of the sky on its surface seemed… darker?

***

As they were walking back across the chains, he looked at Kai and asked, a bit of curiosity finding its way into his voice:

"...How did you know that it will give the knife to Cassie?"

The blind girl turned her head slightly, as if equally interested to hear the answer. Even Effie seemed stumped.

The young man glanced at them and shrugged, smiling beneath his wooden mask.

"Pure heart, pure thoughts… all of us wondered what that means, right? Well… I think we all made a mistake, because it didn't really matter how we understood it. The only thing that mattered was how Noctis had understood it, centuries ago, when he entrusted the knife to the creature."

He grew silent for a bit, and then added:

"He gave the Ruby Knife away after finding out that Hope was driving the Chain Lords mad, fearing what he might do with it should the worst happen. So, to him, purity of heart and thought meant something very specific… the ability to remain of clear mind, true to

his oath, and loyal to his sacred duty. And while none of us is perfect, Cassie is the most clear-headed and dutiful person I know."

Sunny tilted his head, not sure if he agreed with that statement… the creature of the lake had, though, which meant that Kai was at least partially right.

Or it had all been just a coincidence.

As he was remembering the past with a dark expression on his face, the young man suddenly spoke again, his voice hoarse and somber:

"...That was why Noctis had sent us to retrieve the knife instead of coming himself, I guess. Because he has gone mad, betrayed his oath, and abandoned his duty. And we… we are helping him walk even further on that path. Walk further into the madness, until he reaches its end…"

# Chapter-699: Reverse Scale

The journey back was, sadly, uneventful. Sunny had hoped that they would stumble upon a few Nightmare Creatures, but this close to the Sanctuary, there weren't many — except for those too powerful for the cohort to attack without a serious reason and thorough preparations.

Come to think of it, these powerful abominations were probably the reason why the weaker ones kept away. Perhaps that was why Noctis had not eradicated them.

Well… that, or he was simply too lazy.

They returned to the sorcerer's stronghold at dawn, and went to find him without wasting any time. However, Noctis was not at his residence, and the wooden door remained shut. Eventually, they located him at the far side of the island, where the immortal was… making a statue.

There were several giant slabs of marble laying on the ground, and a dozen or so chisels hacking at them without anyone's help. The sorcerer stood some distance away, his luscious black hair powdered by marble dust, and watched it all with a satisfied expression on his face while sipping from a glass of wine.

The first of the statues seemed to be close to completion, and resembled… something. It might have been a human, or a horse. Sunny found it hard to tell.

Noticing them, Noctis grinned.

"Oh, you're back!"

Then, he looked at the hideous stone abomination and raised his chin proudly.

"What do you think? Majestic, right?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, and then said cautiously:

"Uh… that is one word to describe it, without a doubt. But… what is it?"

The sorcerer frowned with confusion.

"What do you mean? It's me! A monument to me, that is. I have decided to grace the generations to come with a vision of my matchless beauty. They deserve the privilege of witnessing it, as well! Who am I to devoid people of such blessing?"

He glanced at the terrifying marble monster, scratched the back of his head, and added:

"Of course, I, uh… might have failed to grasp a couple of nuances of the sculpting art, just yet. This one is really not too bad, but it is just the first attempt. Luckily, I have plenty of these slabs to practice. Hmm… seven should be enough to reach perfection. Well... maybe fourteen… or twenty..."

Sunny stared at the hideous statue for a bit, quite sure that it looked more like a monstrous gargoyle than Noctis. Then, he shook his head and said:

"Good for you. Meanwhile, we have retrieved the Ruby Knife. So… what comes next?"

The sorcerer remained silent for a while, then sighed despondently.

"I guess it's time to take a break. Come, let's have something to eat… and drink, of course… and discuss the future. Now that the knives are in our possession, the future will surely be upon us soon enough…"

***

Some time later, they were enjoying a light breakfast in the shade of the ancient tree that grew in the heart of the Sanctuary. Noctis poured himself some wine, then offered them a polite smile.

"You must be curious about what happens next."

The four of them glanced at each other, then nodded. The sorcerer shrugged.

"Well, to be honest… nothing much. By now, the other Chain Lords already know that I am collecting the knives. The death of the One in the North would have distracted them for a bit, but at the same time, it would have made my actions look much more suspicious. So, they will hold a council and decide how to act."

He took a sip of wine and smiled.

"However, getting Solvane and Sevras into one room is not an easy task. It will take them some time to come together. After that, predictably, they will send a herald to give me some sort of an ultimatum. And only then, after their polite request is denied, will they act, joining forces to invade my lands, capture me, and make me bitterly regret the fact I am immortal."

Noctis shook his head, then laughed.

Sunny, on the other hand, shivered and asked, his voice full of tension:

"Is this really something to laugh about? How are we going to repel an attack of three Transcendents?"

The sorcerer grew silent, then shook his head.

"Ah, well. Simple, really. We won't."

He took another sip of wine and looked up, at the flying ship that hovered above them.

"...Instead, we will attack them first. We will lay siege to the Ivory City."

Noticing their stunned gazes, Noctis laughed again.

"Ah, children… you are so fun to talk to! These expressions are priceless. However, even younglings like you should have learned by

now that having more power doesn't always mean achieving victory. The three Lords that oppose us are very powerful, indeed… but they are not without weaknesses."

He paused, and then looked at them, his eyes glinting with a hint of moonlight:

"To tell you the truth, neither Solvane nor the Sun Prince concern me that much. The only one worth being scared of… the only one who can defeat me… is Sevras, the Ivory Lord. That dreadful dragon. Because between all seven of the Chain Lords, only he and I belong to divine bloodlines. Only the two of us trace our lineage to gods."

Sunny frowned.

"Wait… aren't Sevras and the Sun Prince brothers? How come he is the only one with a divine lineage?"

Noctis shrugged.

"All kinds of strange things happen when it comes to gods. Who knows? In any case… he is the only brother who inherited the Fire. And he is formidable for it, beyond words. So we won't be able to defeat Sevras, unless we strike at his Flaw."

Sunny froze.

"...You know his Flaw?"

The sorcerer smiled gingerly, then chuckled.

"Of course! We immortals spent more than a thousand years bound together. I know all of their Flaws, and they know mine. But Sevras… that guy is rather special. In a sense, he actually has three."

Noctis grew silent for a few moments, taking a sip from his glass. Then, he sighed and said with a hint of sadness:

"One is his actual Flaw. The other... is his brother. And the last one, the direst of them all, is his city."

He looked at the beautiful garden of the Sanctuary, his face turning

cold and ruthless:

"By using all three, we will destroy him."

# Chapter-700: Blood of the Moon

No one dared to speak for a few moments, unnerved by the sudden change in the sorcerer's mood. After a while, though, Effie tugged on his sleeve and asked:

"Uh, care to elaborate... Grandpa Noctis?"

Noctis looked at her absentmindedly, then flinched and jerked his sleeve away, wiping the spot where the little girl touched it with a repulsed look.

"G—grandpa? Who are you calling a grandpa, you critter?!"

He moved his chair away from Effie and stared at her menacingly for a moment, then threw a hurt look at Sunny.

Sunny shrugged.

"...You are a thousand years older than her."

The sorcerer opened his mouth with a deeply offended expression, then puffed and looked away.

After a long and poignant pause, he continued:

"Anyway… as I was saying, Sevras has three weaknesses. The first one is his Flaw — he is incredibly powerful during the day, but nearly powerless during the night. The second one is his brother… surprising, I know, considering what he did to the poor guy. But the Ivory Lord still genuinely cares about his younger sibling.

In fact, that is probably the only thing he cares about anymore, apart from his duty and principles."

Noctis grew quiet for a moment, and then added in a somber tone:

"And the third one is his city. That… Sevras loves his people. But he also hates them. They are a burden that weighs heavily on his soul, one that he cannot escape. Their relationship had long been perverted by Hope, and by his own stubborn unwillingness to give up. Noble, righteous Sevras… he might seem like the sanest among us, but in reality, he is the closest to utter madness.

All it will take to send him over the edge is one push."

The immortal Transcendent sighed, then shook his head reproachfully.

"That guy… ah, truly, he has always been too serious. You can't survive in this place without a sense of humor… even if you are immortal."

The sorcerer giggled at his own joke, and then looked at them with a relaxed smile.

"...So, we will attack at night, when the Ivory Dragon Sevirax is at his weakest. And we will kill his younger brother before dawn. That will be the push that sends him into the abyss, and dooms him."

Sunny shivered, looked at the immortal Transcendent, and asked cautiously:

"...Is it wise, to drive a dragon insane?"

Hearing this, Noctis simply laughed.

"Of course! Sevras the Ivory Lord is fearsome and dreadful, but Sevirax the Dragon is just a mindless beast. Killing a beast is not too difficult, for a cunning hunter. And while I might not be as righteous and as noble as Sevras…"

His smile disappeared, and his eyes suddenly shone with pale light.

"...I am blood of the Moon, Beast God... the God of Hunters."

With that, the sorcerer leaned back and took a sip of his wine, slowly returning to his usual carefree self.

"Granted, I have not hunted for a while… the wilderness is just so ghastly, you know? The dirt, the insects… the fashion. Oh, the horror!"

He sighed heavily, and then smiled again.

Sunny hesitated for a bit. There was a question that he really wanted to ask, but was not sure that he should.

Finally, he said:

"What is your Flaw, then? I know that it is not the kind of question people ask, or answer… but our lives will be depending on your fight with the dragon. I think we have the right to know."

Noctis waved his hand dismissively.

"Oh, it's nothing much. More or less the exact opposite of his. I am at my strongest under the moonlight, but grow weak in the sunlight. No reason to hide it from friends."

He thought for a bit, and then added:

"Solvane's Flaw is perhaps the most cruel… she is cursed with beguiling beauty. Being with her slowly drives people mad with longing and lust, like an insidious drug. The more someone spends time with her, the more they want to possess her, eventually giving in to irresistible desire. A terrible fate, no doubt, but… not exactly something we can use.

Unless, of course, one of you… no, let's not think about that!"

Noctis grinned, then shook his head.

"The Sun Prince's Flaw… well, it doesn't matter anymore. Now that he is encased in that steel monstrosity and almost mindless, we won't be able to make use of it, anyway. We will just have to kill him in a straightforward manner. So… do you guys have questions?"

The four of them looked at each other, and after a long pause, Kai asked hoarsely:

"Yes, Lord Noctis… just one. When we attack the Ivory City at night, and you are fighting the Sun Prince and Solvane… what, exactly, are we four supposed to do?"

The sorcerer stared at them in confusion, then raised an eyebrow.

"Why, is it not clear? While I am preoccupied with the Chain Lords... you will simply have to destroy the Sun Legion and the army of the Red Colosseum."

He thought for a bit, and then added:

"Well, if you somehow fail to destroy them, at least keep them away from me for a while. Solvane and the Sun Prince… yeah, shouldn't take me too long… I think you will manage…"

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At the precipice of night, Sunny came to the edge of the island alone and stood there for a while, shrouded in shadows.

Now that things were nearing the final stage, there was a lot he had to think about. There was the seemingly insane plan of attacking the Ivory City… the battle the cohort was going to wage against two armies while Saints fought in the skies above them…

And then there was Mordret, who remained an unknown variable in this whole mess.

What concerned him the most, however, was his unformed fourth core. Going into the dire battle as a Devil would have been far better… what's more, he couldn't allow himself to undergo the debilitating process of forming a new core in the midst of the furious clash.

With the culmination of the Nightmare swiftly approaching, he had no more time left to slowly seek out and kill Nightmare Creatures, and so, Sunny was forced to do something that he had always been reluctant to do.

With a sigh, he summoned his Shadows.

The taciturn knight, the stygian steed, and the tenebrous serpent appeared in front of him, their figures drowning in the darkness. Two of his shadows slid forward and wrapped themselves around Nightmare and the Soul Serpent, with only the gloomy one remaining at his feet.

Sunny lingered for a bit, and then said:

"Go. Travel far and wide, seek out Nightmare Creatures… and kill them. I need you to hunt for me, instead of with me, for a while."

He paused, and then added somberly:

"Be careful, however. This world… is a dangerous place. No matter how strong you are, how powerful you are, there is always someone — or something — far stronger. Especially when you are alone. So, don't let yourself get destroyed. Alright?"

Saint stared at him for a few moments, then outstretched a hand. After he placed the hilt of the scarlet odachi in it, she silently turned around and jumped down, landing on the links of the heavenly chain far below.

Nightmare and the Soul Serpent dashed in opposite directions, soon disappearing from view.

Just like that, Sunny was left alone.

He remained motionless for a few moments, then sighed and looked down, at the gloomy shadow.

"I guess it's just you and me again. Like good old times, huh?"

The shadow stared at him darkly for a second, and then raised a hand, clearly unsure what good times he was talking about, exactly.

Sunny smiled.

"Yeah. Love you too, buddy…"

# Chapter-701: Four Hunters

Soon after the Shadows left, the connection Sunny shared with them grew faint. He could still feel their existence, but not much beyond that. The same happened with the happy and creepy shadows — when Nightmare and the Soul Serpent left the range of Shadow Control, which had grown to about four kilometers, he lost the ability to perceive them, and the world through them.

Sunny felt that they were out there, somewhere, but that was it. The sudden loss of being able to see and hear through two out of his three shadows was abrupt and jarring, as though he had suddenly lost an eye and a limb. It made Sunny feel very uncomfortable.

Not only was his power severely diminished in the absence of his loyal companions, making him extremely vulnerable, but he also worried about them. There had been many opportunities to send Saint away to hunt on her own in the past, but Sunny never did. The risk was just too high… both for the Shadow and for himself. They were stronger together...

Shadows were not meant to be apart from their master.

But there was no other choice now. He did not know when the three Chain Lords were going to act, exactly, but there was not much time left before. Before the final confrontation began, Sunny had to become a Devil.

…Neph was already a Tyrant, after all. It would not do to let her remain so far ahead.

With a sigh, he turned around and walked back to his room. The gloomy shadow followed, trying to not show that it, too, missed its siblings.

The Shadows were gone, but there was still a lot Sunny had to do. He

had to prepare himself for the battle, both mentally and physically.

The next few days passed without too much happening. Sunny trained archery with Kai, practiced swordsmanship with Cassie, and sharpened his mastery of the spear with Effie's help. The other three were busy with their own preparations, as well.

From time to time, all four left the Sanctuary to hunt and put their teamwork to the test. Sunny received a few fragments from those small expeditions, as well.

In the night, he continued to experiment with weaving. However, he was also careful to get enough sleep. It would not do to go into the final battle exhausted…

After several days of this, while Sunny was laying in bed, the Spell suddenly whispered into his ear:

[You have slain a Fallen Monster, Veiled Slayer.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny sat up and stared into the darkness, tense. So, one of them had found a prey… he did not know which one it was — Saint, Serpent, or Nightmare — or even if they were wounded in the fight. All he knew was that one of his Shadows had emerged victorious, and was not destroyed.

After that first kill, the shadow fragments started to pour into his soul frequently, making the goal of forming a new core before the fateful clash seem less hopeless.

In the meantime, all Sunny could do was carry on.

Two weeks of practicing weaving later, he could proudly say… that he had successfully managed to destroy thirty-eight out of the thirty-nine Memories received in the Red Colosseum. The only one remaining was the emerald bone flute. However, that saved him from damaging his actual Memories, at least.

After the initial success of transplanting enchantments, Sunny found out that it was not as easy as he had thought… well, it had never

really been easy, but now, he realized that there were more things he had to consider than simply the pattern of the weave itself.

Each Memory had a certain capacity when it came to accommodating enchantments. The more powerful an enchantment was, the more burden it put on the weave. To withstand it, weaves needed to be moored to anchors, each serving as a nexus for the strings of essence.

Sunny created those anchors from soul shards — the more he used, the higher the Tier of the Memory was, and the higher its capacity. However, the Rank of the shards also played a role, albeit in a slightly different manner. Apart from capacity, weaves also had a threshold of intensity they could withstand.

More powerful enchantments put too much strain on the strings and the anchors, and so, both the strings and the anchors had to be of a high enough Rank to endure it. Additionally, only the weakest of enchantments could be activated passively, relying on the Memory's own ambient soul energy — everything else would only function when saturated by the flow of essence from the wielder's soul.

…But that was not all.

Sunny had found out the hard way that not all Memories could accommodate all enchantments, regardless of whether they had enough capacity and tolerance. Some were simply not meant for each other. He suspected that the name of the Memory, and therefore its nature, played a role in that.

He had transferred the [Sonorous] enchantments to the Silver Bell and the Ordinary Rock, and also made the Ordinary Rock, which had been able to repeat the sounds it heard, repeat the words Sunny thought of as well. Both of these changes improved upon the original qualities of the Memories, instead of introducing something entirely new. They were not in conflict with their natures.

However, when he tried to do something more radical, the results were disastrous. He could not add an enchantment meant to destroy to a Memory that was meant to protect, unless he wanted the whole weave to break apart.

It was not easy to understand the true nature of Memories, however… the Patient Avenger, for example, was a shield, and its purpose was to protect its master. And yet, that shield possessed enchantments capable of sowing utter devastation on the battlefield.

So, it took Sunny a lot of time — and a lot of wasted Memories — to get an initial grasp on the nuances of what enchantments he could transfer, and where.

The hint was under his nose the whole time… the name of the Memory hid the secret of its nature. He was still unable to fully grasp it, but after destroying dozens of Memories, Sunny managed to develop an intuitive sense that allowed him to gleam the general direction of things, at least.

It was not much... but it was something.

***

At the start of their fifth month in the Nightmare, Sunny found himself on a somewhat familiar island. Some distance away from him, a forest of tall trees stood, darkness nesting between their trunks.

The forest looked different from how it had been in the future. There, the trees were twisted and bent, their bark turned dark and rough. But here, they had no need to change and adapt to the devastating burden of the Crushing yet. And so, the forest stood tall.

…The wolves, however, were more or less the same.

The Nightmare Creature lunging at him was the size of a small truck, with fur as tough as steel wire and a long, terrifying muzzle. Its jaws were wide enough to bite a human in half, and strong enough to crush both bones and armor into dust.

As the giant beast jumped at him, Sunny dodged left and allowed Effie to barrel into the creature, her fist sending it flying to the ground with a whimper. A second later, an arrow landed from above, piercing one of the wolf's paws and nailing it to the ground. A slender rapier flashed through the air, doing the same with another.

Effie appeared near the wolf, pressing it down with all her inhuman strength, and shouted:

"Come on! The bastard is strong! R—really strong!"

Sunny did not make them wait. Jumping forward, he brandished the Cruel Sight and buried it between the abomination's six glowing eyes. Almost instantly, the flame of madness burning in them dimmed, and then was extinguished.

Sunny sighed as the Spell whispered:

[You have slain a Fallen Monster, Dread Wolf.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

He did not need the help of the cohort to slay a Dread Wolf, of course. These vile beasts were easy prey for someone like him.

...He did, however, require their assistance for what was about to happen next.

Summoning the runes, Sunny found the familiar string of them.

The runes read:

Shadow Fragments: [3000/3000].

He prepared himself, and a moment later, the voice of the Spell resounded once again:

[Your shadow is overflowing with power...]

It was time for him to become a Devil.

# Chapter-702: Devil

Sunny sighed, then dismissed the runes, feeling the familiar heat igniting deep within his soul, growing stronger and stronger with each breath.

Effie and Kai looked at him, curiosity and concern mixing in their eyes. Cassie silently retrieved the Quiet Dancer and turned away, listening to the dark forest that surrounded them.

A few moments later, the little girl asked:

"So, uh… what exactly happens now?"

Sunny gave her a grim look.

"...Now I will scream and thrash for a while. Forming a new core is probably the third worst pain I have ever experienced… and that was just the Demon core. Damnation."

Effie blinked a couple of times:

"What are the second and the absolute worst, then?"

He hesitated for a bit, and then said hoarsely:

"Attaining a daemon's lineage was pretty bad. But the most terrible thing, by far… was catching a glimpse of fate. That one I only survived by accident."

The gloomy shadow shivered, remembering their past. Sunny, meanwhile, scoffed.

'Being gutted by the Black Knight did not even make the list, huh… maybe I need to rethink my life choices.'

At that moment, the heat burning within his soul reached a critical

point, and the Spell whispered into his ear:

[Your shadow is taking shape…]

A blinding pain exploded in his chest, sending Sunny to his knees. He gritted his teeth and remained silent, refusing to let out a shriek, a wail, or even a growl. This was not his first time experiencing that pain… even though, this time, it was far more intense.

A human soul was not meant to contain many cores…

That was the conclusion Sunny had come to a while back, thinking about how the process of Awakening was pleasant and euphoric, but gaining new cores and a daemon's lineage was harrowing and torturous. Humans were meant to walk the path of Ascension, but becoming a different type of creature was against their nature.

And Weaver's lineage was simply against all nature… it was aberrant and forbidden, something that was never meant to exist at all.

'Argh!'

The pain grew stronger, and stronger, and then stronger still. Just like before, he felt as though his soul was being torn apart, something rising from its depths and cutting his very being with its sharp edges. However, Sunny was used to this torment. He accepted it, allowed himself to dissipate into it, and endured.

However, then, something entirely unexpected happened.

As his soul was going through a transformation, his body followed suit, as well, catching him by surprise. This time, Sunny failed to suppress a scream, and fell to the ground in convulsions. Effie and Kai stared at him with worry.

'Curse it! What… the hell?!'

It felt as though his bones were breaking, his muscles were tearing, and his skin was on fire. Sunny clawed at the ground, then raised his head and let out a deafening, furious roar.

…As it rolled across the forest, the roar changed, growing lower and

more frightening.

Finally, an eternity later, the heat consuming his soul grew cold, and his tortured body was released from the cage of suffering. Sunny exhaled hoarsely, then relaxed and remained laying on the grass, motionless.

The voice of the Spell resounded from the darkness, echoing between the ancient trees:

[...Your shadow is complete.]

And a few moments later, he heard another voice, this one soft and childish:

"Goddamn. He is even bigger now!"

***

Sunny slowly stood up, intending to take a look at his runes. However, even before that, he noticed that something was different.

The ground… was considerably further down than it had been before.

'Huh?'

Effie and Kai were staring at him, forgetting their task of watching out for a potential attack. Luckily, Cassie was still vigilant… Sunny frowned, then glanced down to take a look at his own body, as well.

It seemed that because he was in a body of a creature, the transformation into a Devil changed it, too. The shadow demon… devil… grew even taller, now standing at almost three meters of height. His skin had turned into a darker shade of grey, and his claws seemed as if they were cut out of glossy morion.

Through the eyes of his shadow, Sunny could see that his horns had grown longer and sharper, as well. More than that, there were now four of them… well, three and a half, considering that one had been broken in the ferocious fight with the Ascended War Maiden Hilde.

And his eyes, which had been entirely black previously, now seemed

like two pools of eerie darkness.

The shadowspawn had been fearsome before, but now, he was simply terrifying. Even Sunny himself would not have been happy to meet this towering fiend on a moonless night.

Effie shook her head, then looked away.

"...My neck hurts from staring at you. Is this how everyone feels when they're talking to me?"

Kai hesitated, then smiled slightly.

"Ah… well… that is presuming that they are looking at your face…"

The little girl snorted.

"Wow! Good one! You've been hanging out with Sunny way too much, it seems! Or... uh... with me?"

Ignoring her jabs, Sunny curiously looked at the ground.

He had gained a new shadow, after all… what would its personality be?

Two identical shadows of a four-armed devil were there, staring at each other. Nevertheless, to Sunny, they seemed very different.

One was gloomy and glowering, full of bad mood and disdain. The other… was also full of disdain, but of another kind.

The new guy somehow managed to seem noble and gallant despite being the exact copy of the other shadow, looking at it with arrogant contempt. They were of the exact same height, and yet, the haughty shadow somehow made it seem as if it was looking down at the gloomy one… and everyone else, for that matter.

Back when the creepy shadow appeared, it lost the staring contest to the gloomy shadow. The haughty shadow, however, did not seem impressed even a little bit. It was as though the very thought of looking away was beneath it.

So, the two of them just continued to drill holes into each other with disdainful stares, unperturbed.

Sunny groaned, then covered his face with a hand.

'Oh, gods… there's two of them now!'

***

Observing the staring contest, Sunny sighed. He was beginning to miss the happy shadow, that hopeless fool — something that had never thought he would ever feel.

Shaking his head, Sunny looked away from the shadows and summoned the runes.

The familiar symbols shimmered in the air in front of him:

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Awakened.

Class: Devil.

Shadow Cores: [4/7].

Shadow Fragments: [0/4000].

A tired, but satisfied smile appeared on his lips.

With a fourth core, his power would increase significantly… his essence reserves had grown, the range of Shadow Control had expanded, and most importantly, he now had an additional shadow to augment either himself, his Memories, or his Shadows. He could increase his physical prowess fivefold, or send one each to Saint, Serpent, and Nightmare while leaving one for himself.

And that was not all.

The Soul Serpent evolved its Class when Sunny did, so it should have become a Devil, as well. That would make it the most powerful — at

least in terms of pure status — Shadow of his.

Not wasting any time, Sunny summoned the Serpent's runes. Somewhat tense, he read:

Shadow: [Soul Serpent].

Shadow Rank: Ascended.

Shadow Class: Devil.

Shadow Attributes: [Shadow Guide], [Soul Weapon], [Soul Beast].

Sunny was both glad and worried. Glad because his Shadow had attained a new Class, but worried because he did not see any new Attributes. The transformation to a Devil was supposed to gift creatures terrible and unnatural powers… however, the Serpent was a bit strange in that regard. It had received a new Ability out of order when rising to a new Rank… so would it receive anything now?

Luckily, he was wrong to fear. Looking lower, Sunny saw a few new runes among the Serpent's abilities.

Shadow Abilities: [Serpentine Steel], [Soul Reaver], [Grace of Shadows], [Formless].

The [Formless] one was new.

Sunny concentrated on it and studied the description curiously.

...A moment later, a strange sound escaped from his lips.

The runes read:

[Formless] Ability Description: "When in the Soul Beast form, the Serpent can assume the shape of any shadow contained within its master's soul, inheriting all powers and abilities. The shadow must be of the same or lower Rank and Class than the Soul Serpent for the transformation to take place, and won't be consumed in the process."

# Chapter-703: Way Back

Soon after settling into his new and improved body, Sunny dismissed his Shadows. He expected them to instantly return to his cores, but this time, there was a delay. It seemed that he had to wait for some time before Saint, Nightmare, and the Soul Serpent returned.

And then there were the happy and the creepy shadows… poor guys were going to have to come back the usual way, by gliding across the Kingdom of Hope one island at a time. They were swift and sneaky, so Sunny was not too worried about them… he also knew that the shadows always sensed in which direction to go to return to their master.

Sunny had gained this bit of knowledge a while back, when his experiments with Shadow Step left the gloomy guy outside of the range of Shadow Control. The shadow had swiftly returned, acting even more petulant and moody than usual.

Its mood had only grown worse when Sunny decided to try and repeat the accident a few more times, just to make sure. But as the result, he learned that once separated from him, the shadows would always try to find their way back to their master, somehow sensing where he was.

And speaking of shadows…

The haughty newcomer was still acting cavalier, radiating a disdainful certainty that it was, without a doubt, better and more distinguished than everyone, and every thing, in every way imaginable.

Sunny shook his head and silently commanded the haughty shadow to wrap itself around his body, which it did… but not before giving him a look that clearly expressed how utterly beneath itself the arrogant guy considered such a trivial task to be.

The members of the cohort had already collected the soul shards from the slain abominations, so there was nothing holding them on the island anymore. They started the journey back to the Sanctuary, and returned to it at dusk.

On the way, Sunny was trying to get used to his new physique. Sure, the shadowspawn had grown taller and more powerful… but as a side effect of that, he had to relearn how to move in this towering body all over again.

The shock was not as dire as when he had first appeared in the Nightmare, but it would still require some time for Sunny to be able to adjust his mindset and battle technique for this new circumstance.

Tired after the day of hunting Nightmare Creatures and traversing the heavenly chains, the four of them separated to go to their rooms. Reaching his own, Sunny fell on the bed… which was now a bit too short for him… and stared at the ceiling for some time, feeling restless and grim.

Today, he had accomplished something that he never thought would be possible in such a short span of time… he had formed the fourth Shadow Core and become a Devil. He was now more powerful than he had ever been, with three mighty Shadows by his side, an arsenal of powerful Memories at his disposal, and even possessing a nascent knowledge of sorcery and weaving.

In fact, Sunny suspected that there had never been an Awakened as powerful as him… except, of course, for Mordret. At least until Nephis returned from being lost in the Dream Realm and Awakened herself.

And yet, he couldn't help but wonder… would that be enough for what was about to come?

And if he survives the Nightmare, would it still be possible for him to hide his strength and avoid the gaze of Sovereigns?

Tormented by these questions, Sunny remained awake for a long time, and then finally fell into the embrace of shallow sleep.

…When the morning came, he opened his eyes and instantly sensed a difference. His heart felt… at ease, somehow. Complete.

His Shadows had returned while he slept.

***

Luckily, all three had survived their task. However, they were not unscathed… both Nightmare and the Soul Serpent bore many wounds, and nestled in the nurturing black flames of his cores, slumbering as their bodies restored themselves. Saint was banged up, too, but to a much lesser extent.

Even though she had not had the company of a shadow, the taciturn knight fared much better than the other two. Well, that was not a surprise… she possessed Attributes that specifically made her tremendously stalwart and durable, after all.

Plus… Saint was Saint. In any case, she was going to heal and recover much faster.

The happy and creepy shadows had returned, as well, and were now staring at their new sibling — the former with delighted excitement, the latter with dark and disturbing fascination. The haughty shadow ignored their stares and pretended that the others did not exist, looking past them with flawlessly disdainful indifference.

'What a character…'

Sunny smiled, then commanded the three shadows to wrap themselves around his body, leaving only the gloomy one on the ground.

Finally feeling like himself, he climbed out of bed, freshened up, and went to find Noctis.

There was a lot they had to discuss…

When he saw the sorcerer, however, the words died on his tongue.

Noctis was not onboard his flying ship, and neither was he on the edge of the island, sculpting his terrible statues. Instead, the immortal

Transcendent had returned to his residence, for once. The wooden door stood open, and the Sailor Dolls let Sunny through without sparing him a single glace.

The interior of the sorcerer's quarters… had changed once again.

The floor stood cracked and broken, mounds of stone shards arching upward, as if displaced by something rising from below. The circle of runes was broken, as well, devoid of any essence and utterly empty.

That, however, was not what scared Sunny.

What made him stumble, instead, was that Noctis was not holding a glass of wine, as had been his habit. Instead, the sorcerer was whistling a carefree tune… and brewing himself tea.

Sunny froze.

'Oh, crap…'

What had it been that the sorcerer told him soon after they met?

...Gather the knives, start a war against both the Ivory City and the Red Colosseum, kill all of the Chain Lords, defy the Lord of Light, break the will of gods, release the Demon of Desire out of her prison... and have a cup of tea.

But then Noctis corrected himself… and said… that he should probably have tea first.

Sunny gulped.

'It's starting…'

# Chapter-704: A Cup of Tea

As Sunny was standing still, petrified by what he saw, Noctis finished brewing the tea and poured the amber liquid into a beautiful porcelain cup. Then, the sorcerer raised it to his face, inhaled the fragrant steam, and let out a satisfied sigh.

Then, noticing an unexpected guest, he glanced at Sunny and smiled:

"Sunless! What a nice surprise. Wait… did something about you change?"

The sorcerer tilted his head with a confused expression, studied the towering figure of the shadow devil for a few moments, and then suddenly brightened up.

"Oh! It's your horn! When did you break it?"

'Really? That is what he noticed?!'

Sunny stared at the cup in the immortal's hands, then grasped the Extraordinary Rock. He didn't really have to hold the Memory to make use of it, but at the moment, Sunny was experiencing a desperate need to hold on to something… anything.

Taking a careful breath, he gripped the Rock and said hoarsely:

"...Back in the Temple of the Chalice. You… you are drinking tea?"

Noctis lingered for a bit, glanced at his cup, and then smiled.

"What a prudent observation. Come… let's not let this nice tea get cold."

With that, the sorcerer turned around and headed deeper into his residence, gesturing for Sunny to follow. The teapot flew into the air and hovered above the immortal's shoulder, as well.

As soon as Sunny made a step forward, however, Noctis suddenly turned, looked at him with a strange expression, and said:

"That, uh… try not to step on anything that seems to be… actually, just don't move at all! We don't want for anything to happen, right?"

At that moment, the chamber trembled again, and more cracks appeared on its stone floor. Sunny stared down with a somber expression, then sighed and used Shadow Step to appear near the sorcerer.

"Why? What's under there?"

Noctis smiled.

"Oh, nothing. Just a, uh… a memento from an old friend. Don't worry about it!"

Sunny, however, did worry. He was not a complete fool… the vast circle of runes, the torrential flood of soul essence that the sorcerer saturated it with, the pool of blood that the ancient stones had absorbed — all of it pointed to something dreadful being imprisoned, or maybe created, there in the darkness of the earth.

However, he thought better of asking any questions and simply followed Noctis to the stone stairs situated on the other side of the chamber.

Using them, they ascended to the top of the ring of giant menhirs and sat down at an elegant wooden table. The sorcerer leaned back in his chair, gazed upon the breathtaking vista of the Kingdom of Hope, and took a sip of tea with an expression of deep satisfaction on his face.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, giving Noctis time to enjoy himself, and then asked:

"It has begun, hasn't it? The other Chain Lords, they are ready to make their move?"

The sorcerer took another sip, sighed, and then said in a relaxed tone:

"Oh, indeed. I suspect that their herald will arrive in a few days. So…

you might want to relax for a bit. Enjoy the tea. This will probably be the last moment of peace you will have for a while, Sunless. Or maybe even the very last."

Sunny remained silent for a long time, a myriad of important questions pressing on his mind. But then, he simply shook his head, chased them away, and poured some tea into a delicate cup that stood on the table, as if waiting for him.

Neither of them spoke for a while, enjoying the fragrant drink and the beautiful sight of the flying islands in peace.

…Despite the approaching doom, the world felt tranquil and warm here, on the parapet of the Sanctuary.

After a while, Noctis sighed and said in a wistful tone:

"I am going to miss this, I think."

Then, he glanced at Sunny and asked with a hint of curiosity in his voice:

"Tell me, Sunless… why are you here? It is no surprise that someone like me would want to free Hope. But what would compel a shadow like you to attempt it, as well? You must know the risk."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then sighed.

"To tell you the truth… I don't really know. I used to know, or at least think that I knew. I had lofty desires. To grow stronger than others, to break free from the chains of fate. And maybe… maybe I harbor those desires still. But after coming to this cursed land and being ground into dust by it… now, everything is so unclear.

And my ardent desires suddenly seem so… lacking."

He paused, looked down, and then added evenly:

"Or maybe it's just me who is lacking. And lost."

Noctis glanced at him, took a sip of tea, and asked with a curious smile:

"What is it that you think you are lacking? And from what are you lost?"

Sunny did not speak immediately, letting the pressure of the Flaw build inside his soul for a few moments. Then, he said with a grin:

"...How should I know? If I had an answer for that, I wouldn't be feeling this way, would I?"

He chuckled, and then asked:

"Have you heard the legend of a hero named Odysseus?"

Noctis blinked a couple of times, then shook his head.

"Never heard of that guy. A legend, really? Huh. Strange that some third-rate hero I don't even know got to have a whole legend to himself…"

Sunny smiled, and then said:

"A good friend told me that legend. Odysseus spent ten years away from home, fighting a war in a distant land. And then, he spent ten more years trying to find his way back home. He lost all his friends and endured countless hardships, facing terrible monsters and dangerous beings of all sorts. But he never gave up, and eventually returned home. To Ithaca."

His smile disappeared, replaced by a distant expression. After a few moments of silence, Sunny sighed.

"...I feel like Odysseus, too, sometimes. Lost in a distant land. Only, unlike him, I don't have a home to want to return to. I have nothing to strive for, apart from saving my skin, keeping my friends alive, and maybe living a little bit better than a wild beast. Can someone really be lost, if they don't belong anywhere?"

Noctis took a sip of his tea, solemnly pondered on it for a bit, and then said thoughtfully:

"I see. I understand... so what you lack is a house? That is why you are trying to free Hope? To get a house? Wait… Sunless, are you

trying to say that you want to repossess the Ivory Tower?!"

Sunny choked on his tea, then glared at the sorcerer with outrage:

"What even… no, that is not what I am saying! Home is just a metaphor, you immortal fool!"

Noctis blinked a couple of times, then asked with a deadpan expression:

"...What's a metaphor?"

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, then snorted and opened his mouth, intending to answer…

Before he did however, a loud rattling of chains resounded in the air, and the whole Sanctuary shuddered slightly beneath them.

No… it was the island itself. The whole island trembled.

Sunny froze, and then asked, his voice tense and grim:

"What… the hell… was that?"

Noctis calmly finished his tea, closed his eyes in delight for a moment, and then looked west.

"It's their herald, I guess. He seems to have arrived sooner than I expected… ah, what a bother. We didn't even get to drink the whole pot…"

# Chapter-705: Herald of the Sun

Noctis sighed, then placed his empty cup on the table and stood up. He straightened the folds of his silk garment, then shook his head with a slight smile and headed across the stone plain of the menhirs.

Sunny scrambled to catch up to him, full of apprehension. The first thing he said to the sorcerer, however, had nothing to do with the messenger of the Chain Lords.

"A metaphor is a figure of speech… uh... sort of like an analogy?"

Noctis glanced at him with surprise.

"I must say, your composure is commendable, Sunless. However… do you really think that this is very important right now? Come now, we need to meet our visitor before he reaches the Sanctuary."

The sorcerer gestured at the silhouette of the flying ship that hovered some distance away, almost at the same height as them. Sunny summoned the Dark Wing, and then said:

"Uh... no. I don't. Why can't we meet the herald here, though? No, wait… if he did not even reach the Sanctuary yet, why is the island shaking?"

Noctis shrugged and gracefully rose into the air, flying toward the ship. What means he was using to do so, Sunny did not know. All he could do was jump as high as he could, and then glide forward.

The sorcerer glanced at him, and then said somberly:

"If we were to meet the herald here, my beautiful sanctuary might… well... get damaged. That would not do. As to why the island is shaking, I guess we'll see…"

Soon, they landed on the deck. The Sailor Dolls had already raised the sails and were hurrying around, preparing the ship for departure. Cassie, Kai, and Effie were also there, although they seemed to have arrived only moments before Sunny and Noctis.

As Sunny looked at them with a silent question, Effie simply nodded toward Cassie. The mystery of their swift reaction was easily revealed.

The sorcerer went to the stern of the flying ship without wasting any time, and took his position as the kybernetes — the guide who steered the ship as it flew through the air. The ancient vessel had no steering wheel, of course, and instead relied on two steering oars, which were situated at the very rear of it.

There was a runic circle inscribed between the oars. Noctis stepped inside, turned, leaned comfortably on the bending inner surface of the tall aplustre, and placed his hands on the oars with a relaxed expression on his face. A moment later, the circle shimmered with ethereal light.

The flying ship had to be controlled both physically and with soul essence. There were invisible energy pathways spanning the whole length of it, all leading to the roots of the beautiful tree growing around the main mast.

Luckily, it was the tree that produced the tremendous flow of essence required to propel the vessel through the air, and not the kybernetes. Otherwise, Cassie would have never been able to fly it in the future. However, the pilot still needed to control that flow and serve as its nexus, and so, only an Awakened could do it.

…Or a Transcendent.

Noctis sent his own essence into the runic circle, connecting his soul to the ship, and the ancient vessel slowly started to move, gaining speed as the wind filled its sails. Holding the oars with a carefree smile, the sorcerer then glanced at Cassie and said:

"Song of the Fallen, my lady… you wished to observe how I control this beauty? Here is your chance to see a master at work! Truly, there

is no helmsman more skilled and distinguished than me in the whole of the Kingdom of Hope. Granted, this flight won't be too long…"

He suddenly grew silent, glanced at the blind girl with a guilty expression on his face, and then awkwardly cleared his throat.

"Well, uh… I guess "see" was the wrong word to use… hmm…"

Cassie remained silent for a few moments, then said neutrally:

"...I am used to it. Do not worry."

Knowing that the young woman had been interested in the flying ship and its mysteries, Sunny left the two of them alone and walked to the side, staring into the distance with a tense look on his face.

Noctis had failed to explain why the approach of the herald caused the Sanctuary to tremble, but Sunny had an idea. The islands were all connected to each other by the heavenly chains, and so, any strong tremor was bound to spread outward like a wave. The question was… what could have caused a quake strong enough for them to feel from several islands away?

…Perhaps a giant steel colossus could.

He gritted his teeth.

'A messenger of the Chain Lords… was that a joke? Noctis conveniently failed to mention that this herald was going to be one of those Lords himself…'

And what the hell had the sorcerer meant, saying that they had to meet the herald elsewhere, to avoid damaging the Sanctuary? Weren't they simply going to speak? That was what messengers were for, weren't they, to deliver words?

As several islands flowed past beneath the speeding ship, he suddenly caught sight of an especially familiar one. Of course, in this era, it looked different.

The Iron Hand island was still rather large and covered by soft grass, but the ancient stone columns that had been broken in the future still

stood tall, forming three concentric circles. From above, they seem like a giant sundial… or moondial, perhaps.

And, of course, there was no colossal iron hand laying in the center of the island, to give it the peculiar name.

…At least not yet.

Sunny suddenly felt cold shivers run down his spine.

He didn't have time to think about it more, however, because, at that moment, something else attracted his attention.

Some distance away, shrouded in the haze of dawn, he could see the neighboring island. Currently, it was in a higher position than them. The island suddenly swayed, and a small human figure jumped from its edge.

Or rather, it just seemed small because of the distance.

Sunny felt Kai grow still and tense by his side.

As the sun shined on its steel surface, the figure flew through the air, covering an unimaginable distance with its leap. It seemed to be moving slowly, but Sunny knew that this was just a mirage caused by the scale of things.

And indeed, the radiant figure grew larger and larger with each moment, turning into a brilliant steel giant as it drew closer.

Easily breaching several kilometers with his jump, the giant landed on the surface of the Iron Hand island, causing the whole of it to lurch sideways and sway. The heavenly chains rattled wildly, and a cloud of debris was raised into the air.

Not paying the chaos he had caused any attention, the colossus then slowly straightened, grew motionless, and then slightly turned his head.

…He was looking directly at the flying ship, no expression written on his beautiful steel face, two suns reflecting in the polished surface of his steel eyes.

The Sun Prince had come to deliver a message to Noctis.

# Chapter-706: Ultimatum

Looking at the colossus, Sunny understood why Kai had called him terrifying. Sun Prince stood at nearly ninety meters tall, towering above the island like a mountain of steel. He was cast in the shape of a noble warrior wearing light armor. The surface of the armor was polished and shone blindingly in the sun, while the rest of the giant was dull and grey.

The colossal statues of the seven heroes of the Forgotten Shore, including the walking one Sunny and the cohort had ridden once, were more than twice as tall, but it was hard not to get shocked by the sheer mass and crushing presence of the Transcendent Chain Lord… or rather, of the steel shell he was entombed within.

A sickening feeling of fear grasped Sunny's heart, which he then strangled and banished, looking at the towering Lord with a grim expression.

He had a reason to feel fear, however.

A half-forgotten image of a nightmarish scene flashed before his eyes — a fragment of a nightmare where he stood petrified on a blood-soaked battlefield, watching in horror as a giant steel sole descended from above to turn him, and his fellow soldiers, into puddles of crushed bones and bloody sludge.

And another, a memory of endless, harrowing torture that he had endured at the hands of his brother, of a human-shaped cage and a pit filled with molten metal.

And finally, the last one — the vision of a giant steel corpse swinging forlornly in torn chains, upside down, its chest shattered by some devastating strike.

…So, this was Sun Prince.

Sunny had never met him, and yet, it felt as though they were old acquaintances. For better or worse...

As the giant stared at the flying ship with a motionless face of a statue, Sunny turned to Noctis and scowled.

"...Now what?"

The sorcerer sighed, then moved one of the oars, sending the vessel into a descent. His carefree smile was starting to look a little forced.

"Now, well… we go and talk to him, I guess? Have a civilized discussion..."

Sunny turned back and looked at Sun Prince for a bit, then said somberly:

"Do you think he knows that it was you who erased his memory of hiding the Ivory Knife, causing him to experience a hundred years of torture, and then end up in this state? And that you actually stole it instead?"

Noctis suddenly choked, causing the ship to careen sideways, and hissed:

"Say it louder, will you!"

Sunny froze.

"Oh… sorry…"

The sorcerer righted the vessel, then said with outrage:

"First of all, I did not cause anything! I just granted a… a colleague's request. Back then, we did not even know that Hope was driving us all mad, so how was I supposed to know what will happen? Secondly… I did not steal the Ivory Knife… I just happened to find it where he had left it, alright? By pure coincidence. And lastly…"

He paused, and then added in a darker tone:

"I am not sure that he really knows anything, anymore. He is still

alive, somewhere inside, but I don't think he is fully… sentient. At least… at least I hope that he is not…"

The ship approached the ground in somber silence, stopping just outside the first ring of pillars, and hovered in place. Noctis lingered for a few moments, and then let go of the oars. However, he did not command the Sailor Dolls to lower the sails.

The sorcerer straightened his garments, and then inhaled deeply.

"Let's go and see what he has to say, shall we?"

Sunny glanced at his friends, then shook his head and followed Noctis. There was a high chance that they were going to witness a brawl between Saints… he was sure that everyone understood what danger they were all in.

The last time he witnessed two Saints fighting, a whole island had been destroyed and crumbled into the Sky Below. Sunny and Cassie had only survived that terrifying clash by promptly running away, and even then just barely.

What was going to happen today? And was Noctis strong enough to ward off the colossus?

Somehow, it was hard to imagine anything, let alone the flimsy sorcerer, stopping that mountain of steel. But Noctis was no fool… surely, he had a plan. His madness was of an insidious kind, after all. He would not have risked his safety, and his desire to free Hope, without having a way out.

Together, the five of them disembarked the flying ship, landed on the soil of the Iron Hand Island, and walked between the tall pillars. They approached the very center of the giant moondial and stopped there, waiting.

When they did, Sun Prince finally moved, walking toward them with a measured gait. With each of his steps, the island trembled, causing the heavenly chains to rattle, and their hearts to tremble.

Sunny was staring at the approaching colossus, feeling worse and worse about the situation. All his Shadows were yet to recover, and

so, he was left with nothing but his own strength to react should something happen.

…Well, his own strength, and that of his cohort.

But what could they do against this monstrosity, even together?

Finally, the giant reached the pillars and stopped outside the outward circle, looking at them from high above. Drowned in his cold shadow, Sunny couldn't help but feel like a tiny insect.

Looking up with a grave expression, he gritted his teeth and said:

"...I feel like an ant."

Effie, who was also craning her neck to stare at the colossus, glanced at him, hesitated for a moment, and then smiled.

"You are not an ant, Sunny. You are a cockroach. Remember?"

He blinked a couple of times, then slowly grinned.

…Somehow, that made him feel better.

And then, a thundering voice suddenly resounded from all around them, making their bones rattle.

The giant… spoke.

He said:

"...NOCTIS… YOU HAVE… THE KNIVES."

The voice of Sun Prince did not sound human, but neither did it sound robotic. It was just… strange, and empty. As if it was not a person speaking, but the world itself.

A desolate world full of ruins.

Hearing it, the sorcerer grimaced, then covered his ears.

"Huh… he still remembers how to speak…"

The thundering voice of the colossus resounded once more, making them shiver:

"...SURRENDER… THE KNIVES."

Sunny turned his head slightly and glanced at Noctis, wondering what his reaction would be.

The sorcerer, meanwhile, blinked a few times… and took a big step back, distancing himself from Sunny.

Then, he raised a hand, pointed a finger at him, and said with sincere confusion:

"What are you talking about? I don't have any knives! It's this guy over here, he has them. So… if you want them, come and take them from him! Leave this poor sorcerer out of this, by the Moon…"

# Chapter-707: Treachery

Sunny froze in place, dumbfounded, and just stood still for a moment. Surrounded by stunned silence, all he could hear was the wild beating of his hearts and the hum of blood rushing in his ears.

His eye twitched.

'No way… no way the bastard just did this to me…'

As all four of his shadows wrapped themselves around his body, Sunny turned his head slightly and stared at the sorcerer's finger, which was, without a shadow of a doubt, pointing straight at his broad back. His mouth turned dry.

'He did!'

What the hell was Noctis thinking?!

No, no... the sorcerer would not have sold him out. Yes, shifting the blame on Sunny had to be a con of some sort... but what would Noctis achieve by doing this? Nothing!

Unless, of course...

Unless this had been his plan all along.

A cold, sickening feeling suddenly grasped Sunny's heart.

High above him, the gaze of the dreadful colossus slowly shifted from the elegant figure of the sorcerer to the four-armed devil standing by his side. The weight of that gaze pressed down on Sunny, making him bare his teeth in a snarl. It felt as if he was being pierced by it, his very soul laid bare.

And somewhere within his soul, locked inside the Covetous Coffer, were the three knives — one made of obsidian, one made of glass,

one made of bloodred ruby.

Something changed about the terrifying presence of Sun Prince, and his deafening voice resounded once again, now suffused by a distant, pale echo of a vague emotion.

"...SHADOW."

Sunny paled. He had forgotten that the master of the original shadowspawn was to blame for what happened to the prince of the Ivory City, as well. In fact, one could even say that Shadow Lord was the main culprit of the hundred years of harrowing torture that Sun Prince endured… he had stolen the ember knife, after all.

So, if the steel colossus had a reason to really hate someone…

'Curses.'

Feeling his hearts turn cold, Sunny silently watched as the colossus shifted his weight, then bent slightly, preparing to reach down with his giant steel hand. He was desperately trying to calculate his chances of escaping this situation alive…

At that moment, Noctis suddenly cleared his throat, and then addressed Sun Prince in a friendly tone:

"Oh, but do be careful! You know how tricky shadows are, my friend. This one in particular is full of treachery, vileness, and unspeakable malice… the beast even slaughtered a temple full of innocent maidens! He also tried to poison me... oh, the villainy! So, be careful when you grab him!

Or you just might lose your hand..."

A low growl escaped from Sunny's mouth. He could feel the other members of the cohort grow tense and ready to fight. Cassie's hand fell on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer, and Kai outstretched his arm, ready to summon his bow. Effie was staring up with a somber expression on her childish face, her body drawn like a spring.

But what were they supposed to do?

Even if Sunny knew which of the three knives was meant for Sun Prince, how could he thrust it into the Transcendent's flesh? The actual body of the Chain Lord was buried somewhere inside the walking mountain of steel. More than that, using the knife would only make him mortal… after that, he would still have to be killed, somehow…

Killing a Saint was no easy task.

As the colossus leaned down and moved his hand to reach inside the moondial, Sunny was thinking feverishly. He saw only one option — to run, run, run away as fast as he could. Using Shadow Step, he would be able to dodge, at least.

But for how long would he be able to outrun the giant? Sunny had seen him breach the gap between two islands with one jump. Now that the range of Shadow Control had grown, Sunny could possibly do the same…

The difference was that a single jump like that was going to drain all his essence, while Sun Prince would be able to pursue him indefinitely, tireless and inescapable like death itself.

'Damn, damn, damn…'

The world suddenly grew darker, the sun obstructed by a giant palm. It was open, descending from above like a vast plain of grey steel. It was as though the sky itself was falling on his head.

Effie took a step back and hissed:

"Sunny! What do we do?!"

Frozen in place, he hesitated for a moment.

And then said:

"Nothing. Don't do anything… don't move…"

There was no point in trying to fight Sun Prince, or even running away.

Because…

As the steel colossus leaned over the outer ring of the ancient moondial, the tall pillars shone with ethereal light, suddenly flooded with a mind-boggling amount of soul essence. A myriad of runes revealed themselves, carved in a vast circle that encompassed the whole structure.

And then, everything around them turned to light… cold, pale light of the moon.

Blinded by it, Sunny didn't see what happened next, and just felt something vast and chilling, and yet intangible, move past him with stunning speed. Then, he heard the thunder of a deafening impact, and the groan of steel that was being torn apart. The whole island shook, the quake throwing him to the ground. Sunny hit the cold stones, and sensed the shadow of Sun Prince… changing.

As the pale moonlight dimmed and was extinguished, he saw a shocking sight.

The moondial lay broken, the pillars shattered and toppled over. Not too far away from him, a giant steel hand rested on the ground.

However, it was not attached to the body of the colossus anymore.

The giant was staggering back, his right arm torn at the shoulder. A river of molten metal was flowing from the terrible wound, falling down like blood. The grass was turning to ash where it fell.

…And amidst all of this, unperturbed, stood Noctis. The sorcerer's expression was calm and slightly amused.

Staring at all the chaos, he flicked a speck of dust off his silk garments, shook his head, and said:

"Tsk, have I not warned him to be careful? I did, didn't I? By the Moon, why does no one listen to me... I am the wisest man in all of Kingdom of Hope, after all…"

# Chapter-708: Crimson Beast of Twilight

The colossus staggered back, swayed, and then moved his foot to balance himself. The island quaked once more, and the giant grew still, bent slightly and grasping the gaping wound with his one remaining hand. His head turned, staring at Noctis with the same empty, unmoving expression.

However, his polished steel eyes, which had been burning with the blinding reflections of the sun, became submerged in deep shadow.

For a moment, there was silence.

Sunny gritted his teeth, then slowly exhaled and raised a hand to wipe the sweat off his brow.

…After the initial panic of being sold out by Noctis, he had forced himself to calm down and think. It was then that Sunny had realized that they were not in real danger, and told his friends to stand down.

The immortal sorcerer was many things, including a liar and a cheat. Sunny did not doubt that Noctis had lied to him on many occasions, and about many things — sometimes for a specific purpose, and sometimes simply for the fun of it. However, one thing that Noctis was not… was a fool.

Sunny could imagine many situations in which the immortal would betray and damn him to death, but not without a good reason. And surrendering the cohort to Sun Prince was the opposite of what Noctis wanted to achieve — at best, it would have bought him some time, at the expense of losing the three knives to the other Chain Lords.

One thing that Sunny did not doubt was the sincerity of the sorcerer's

desire to free Hope. And so, he had understood that the immortal's sudden betrayal was just another deception.

It had not been hard to guess what the purpose of the deception was, as well. After all, Sunny had already guessed how the fateful meeting between rebellious Noctis and the herald of the Chain Lords was going to end, and how the Iron Hand island would get its name.

Sun Prince had walked right into the sorcerer's trap, and Sunny… Sunny had been used as bait.

Not for the first time, and probably not for the last...

So, he wasn't very shocked by the sight of the giant's missing arm and of the streams of molten steel that flowed out of it, slowly cooling on the broken stones… or at least he wasn't supposed to be.

In reality, the scene in front of him was so striking, so tremendous that it was simply impossible to remain untouched by the vast and poignant scale of it.

Still…

He turned to Noctis, remained silent for a moment, and then let out a low growl:

"...You could have warned me, you know?"

The sorcerer looked at him with sincere confusion. Then, he smiled and said:

"But... but what if I changed my mind at the last moment? Then, warning you would have made me a liar! I have a reputation to uphold, don't I?"

With that Noctis winked at him, then turned to face the motionless colossus.

As Sunny stared at him darkly, the smile slowly disappeared from the sorcerer's face, making way for something cold and frightening. His grey eyes shone with distant moonlight. And in that moonlight, there was…

Madness.

Taking a step forward, Noctis suddenly appeared to be taller than he had been, his previously contained presence spreading over the world like a flood. Sunny shivered, feeling… feeling like prey being stalked by a hungry predator.

The air suddenly seemed to smell of blood, the light of the sun appeared slightly dimmer, and in the echoing silence, they could almost hear the howls of countless beasts.

Even though Sunny knew and somewhat trusted Noctis, he suddenly felt scared.

…And he wasn't even the focus of the immortal's furious gaze. Instead, it was aimed at the hunched colossus.

The sorcerer grinned, revealing his canines, and spoke, his clear voice flowing across the island like a river of blood:

"Surrender the knives? Ah, I don't think so, my old friend… if I do, how will I kill you and your vile brother?"

He laughed, and then took another step forward, raising his hand. A toppled pillar that blocked his path exploded into a rain of shards and stone dust, obliterated in a split second.

"...And that is what I intend to do. You, Sevras, Solvane… I'll kill you all, break the chains that bind the Demon of Desire, and set her free."

Noctis took another step and then stopped, staring at Sun Prince with ruthless determination.

"So, if you want to take the knives, you'll have to take them off my cold corpse. Oh, wait… you can't. I am immortal."

He threw his head back and laughed again. This time, the sorcerer's laughter did not seem carefree and infectious… instead, it was chilling and full of madness.

The steel colossus looked at him from above, unmoving. His face was motionless and unexpressive, like that of a statue. However… it

seemed as though the shadows veiling his eyes grew even deeper.

Noctis shook his head, and then said with disdain:

"Oh, but you can try, of course. Go back… go back and return with the Sun Legion, with the Dragon Sevirax, with the Warriors of the Red Colosseum, with Solvane. You know where to find me… and I'll be waiting to welcome you."

The giant continued to stare at him for a while, the molten steel flowing between his fingers. Sunny held his breath, not knowing what was going to happen next.

…Then, Sun Prince straightened, turned around, and walked away, making the island shake with each step.

He reached the edge of it, stepped down on the heavenly chain, and continued walking, somehow keeping perfect balance. The chain was colossal in its own right, and yet, the giant made it seem like a thin rope being traversed by a rope-walker.

Soon, he reached the neighboring island, climbed on it, and disappeared from sight. Only the rattling of chains and the tremors running through the ground from time to time reminded them of his visit.

…Well, that, and the giant hand laying not too far away from them.

Sunny studied it for a while, then walked over to Noctis and asked, his voice low and cautious:

"Not to complain… but why let him go? Wouldn't it be easier to kill him right here and now? We won't get another chance to catch him alone, most likely. And judging by how easily you took his arm off…"

Noctis did not respond immediately. Instead, he slowly turned his head, looked at Sunny coldly… and then gracelessly fell on his butt, his face pale, his chest rising and falling wildly, and his breath hoarse and labored.

The sorcerer cursed, looking as if he was about to vomit.

"...Easily? Are you insane? I am at my weakest during the day, remember! And that strike… gods… I spent several centuries infusing this shrine with moonlight. Do you think there's another one just laying around nearby?! Just… just be happy he believed my bluff.

Otherwise… things might have turned really ugly really fast for us…"

Sunny stared at the sorcerer with wide eyes for several long moments, then shook his head and sighed.

"Lunatic... you damned lunatic… by the Moon, I take it back! You are a fool..."

# Chapter-709: Nature of the Beast

It was only later, when they returned to the flying ship and looked down upon the devastation that the short and furious clash between Noctis and Sun Prince had created, did the understanding of what had happened finally settled in their minds. There was no going back now.

…The war of immortals had finally started.

Soon, the whole of the Kingdom of Hope was going to be turned into a battlefield and drowned in blood by its frenzy. And then, the repercussions of that madness were going to spread outward like a tidal wave, changing the world forever.

Looking down, Sunny couldn't help but shiver. The broken pillars, the severed hand of a giant, the ash swirling in the air… this place, this event, this moment in time…

Was that the spark that would eventually ignite another, much more terrifying war? A war between gods and daemons, one that would destroy them all and bring about the end of the world… the war to end all wars. He still suspected that it was the unchaining of the Demon of Desire that had set it in motion.

Looking down, Sunny silently whispered:

'But then came desire, and with it came direction…'

Turning his head slightly, he looked at Noctis — the person who had started it all. The sorcerer seemed calm and without a worry in the world. His beautiful face was pale with exhaustion, but other than that, he did not look too different from his usual self… not at all like a person who had potentially ushered in the obliterating apocalypse.

Did he not understand the consequences of his actions?

…Or did he understand them far better than Sunny ever could?

With a sigh, Sunny threw one last glance at the Iron Hand island — now truly and once again deserving of its name — and walked to sit beneath the branches of the sacred tree. Despite the fact that he had not done much, he felt exhausted, too. And there was a lot he had to think about…

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On the way back, Sunny remembered the future. He had been to the Iron Hand island many times, had seen the toppled pillars and the severed arm of a giant, and had even sketched and described them in detail for an exploration report.

And now, he had witnessed how the island came to be in that state.

Another event from the distant past had repeated itself inside the Nightmare almost to a tee. Sunny had already formed a theory that fate was like a current, always pulling things toward an inescapable conclusion, after the destruction of the Temple of the Chalice. The details could be changed, but the result seemed to always be the same.

The events that had transpired on the Iron Hand island only cemented that theory.

By all accounts, the appearance of the cohort… and Mordret… should have drastically changed the flow of history in the Kingdom of Hope. They had accelerated the start of the war, and even slain one of the Chain Lords. If not for them, Noctis would have most likely spent several years searching for a way to make a deal with Weaver, and only then rebelled against the other immortals.

Those several years were, perhaps, the countdown to the blossoming of the Nightmare Seed. If no Awakened appeared to challenge the Nightmare by then… the Seed would have bloomed? Was that the logic? Seeds blossomed when the conflict inside them resolved itself and fate repeated unchanged?

Before, Sunny had thought that the task of the challenger was to resolve a conflict that would have otherwise remained unresolved. But now, knowing what he knew about the Chained Islands and the Kingdom of Hope, he realized that he had been wrong. With or without his help, Noctis was always going to start a war, the Ivory Tower was always going to break free from its chains…

The Temple of the Chalice was always going to be destroyed, and Sun Prince was always going to lose his hand to the enchanted moondial.

Come to think of it, his First Nightmare would have resolved itself without his intervention, too... one way or another. The nameless temple slave would have probably died, and Auro of the Nine would have survived… or would they? In any case, there would have been an ending.

'That… doesn't really make sense.'

So what was the role of the challengers? If the conflict could resolve itself, why were they here? What did the Spell want from them? Prove that they were equal to the heroes of the past? Do it better than them? Simply survive?

The Spell did not care what one did inside the Nightmare and how they went about solving the conflict. The reward was going to be the same, either way — the challenger would ascend to a new Rank. They could receive a True Name, or even, in extremely rare cases, an evolution of their Aspect, but those things could be done outside a Nightmare, as well.

The only thing the Spell cared about was that the challenger survived until the end.

…But that was not entirely true. The Spell would not give additional rewards, or deny the survivor their ascension. However, it did care a little… at least enough to appraise the challenger's performance. The appraisal did not really matter outside of the First Nightmare, where it was tied to the boon, but the Spell still gave them out each time.

Good, Exceptional, Remarkable... Glorious... and so on.

Was there a hint in there, somewhere, about what it wanted?

If so… Sunny had apparently pleased the Spell very much in his first trial.

Sitting in the shade of the sacred tree, he sighed and looked into the distance with a solemn expression.

'I hope it will be pleased with us again, this time. I hope we survive…'

***

Soon, the flying ship returned to the Sanctuary and descended to its usual position above the Altar Island. As they returned to the ground, Sunny could see hundreds of faces turned to them, fear and uncertainty written in their lines.

The inhabitants of the Sanctuary had not seen the clash between Noctis and Sun Prince, but they all knew that something was wrong. By now, the island had stopped trembling, but their hearts did not.

Without paying them any attention, the sorcerer tiredly landed on the grass, then turned to Sunny and frowned slightly.

"I am going to rest for a couple of days. That… most of the Sun Legion, as well as the army of the Red Colosseum, are arrayed along the border between Solvane's territory and that of the Ivory City. It is going to take them at least two weeks to assemble together and march east… so, we will give them enough time to break the current formation, but not enough to build a new one.

We attack in seven days."

He hesitated for a few moments, and then suddenly smiled:

"Warmongers and the Sun Legion forgetting their hatred and fighting side by side… truly, no one but me could have made it happen! Am I not the most talented diplomat in all of the Kingdom of Hope?"

With that, Noctis laughed, turned around, and walked away.

Sunny stared at his back for a few moments, then sighed and said quietly:

"You are definitely not. But then again… maybe you are…"

# Chapter-710: Departure

The next morning, Sunny woke up in a strange mood. Knowing that they were nearing the end of the Nightmare — and, perhaps, their own — he had expected himself to be consumed by somber trepidation. But, surprisingly, Sunny felt fine. It was as though the scope of the approaching battle was simply too large to be evaluated, and so, his mind had not bothered with it at all.

Instead, he had practical problems he needed to solve. Sunny still did not feel completely comfortable in his new body — he barely had any time to get accustomed to its size and weight, after all. The next several days were going to be crucial, in that regard.

His previous garments had been torn when he evolved, and so, Sunny summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud to wrap itself around his towering body. Although not as powerful as his other suits of armor, the Shroud was much more comfortable. It was a bit nostalgic to wear the light armor once again, but also a bit sad to see it relegated to serving as a bonafide training suit.

Remembering how he had planned to slaughter countless dormant Nightmare Creatures while being invulnerable thanks to his new, incredible Awakened armor of the fifth Tier just a few years ago, Sunny smiled wistfully and walked out of his room.

The Sanctuary seemed… different, somehow.

The ring of giant menhirs was the same, and so was the beautiful garden. However, the people living in the ancient shrine had changed. They were hurried and full of fear, moving with panicked speed and feverish determination.

Sunny noticed a few familiar faces. The old woman he had seen on his first day here was standing alone, a lost look on her face. The young woman was carrying the frightened child in her hands and a

heavy pack on her back. The kind man with a neatly trimmed beard was gritting his teeth, his hand resting on the worn hilt of his sword.

He sighed and looked away.

An immortal Transcendent had started this war to free a daemon from a prison built by a god… but these little people were the ones that were going to suffer the most as the result. In fact, they had been the ones to suffer the most throughout all of this, from the destruction of the Kingdom of Hope to the madness she had cursed this land with, to now.

He had been one of the little people himself, once...

Now, he was a devil destroying their lives.

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then looked up at the sound of steps approaching him. He saw Effie and Kai, both wearing their armors and packs, as though ready to go on a long hunt.

He raised his eyebrows.

"...Going somewhere?"

The little girl glanced at the masked cripple, and then shrugged. Kai, meanwhile, smiled… even though Sunny could not see his face, he could tell by his eyes.

He could also tell that the smile was tinted with sadness.

The archer simply nodded.

"Yes... we are leaving."

He hesitated for a moment, then added:

"Not for long, of course. We will be back before the week is over. You see... the Sanctuary, it was a shelter for those who wanted to find peace in this land of madness. But now that Noctis started a war and both the Sun Legion and the Warmongers are marching to raze it to the ground, that shelter is no more."

Effie shook her head, then sighed.

"The west belongs to the warring cults of War and Sun, the south is abandoned and overtaken by Nightmare Creatures, the north… well, you know. These poor fools have nowhere else to go. So, we are going to guide them to one of the Great Chains and help them cross to the other side. And leave the Kingdom of Hope behind, forever."

She scratched the back of her head, then said thoughtfully:

"...Actually, we are not even sure if the Nightmare goes that far. Maybe there's nothing out there, beyond the Chained Island. And yes, we know that these people are not even real. Still… we thought that we'd at least try. Cassie even went and convinced Noctis to lend her the ship, to help transport them."

Sunny stared at her, surprised. The little girl raised her chin:

"What? I know that it's stupid. People need to do stupid things sometimes, you know?"

He slowly shook his head.

"...No. Actually, I don't think that it's stupid at all. It's just… the three of you are going, so why didn't you invite me as well?"

Effie grinned.

"You have stuff to do! How are you going to get used to that lanky body of yours while babysitting a bunch of refugees? So, don't be lazy and get that stone girlfriend of yours to beat you black and blue while we are gone. We have a date with two whole armies in a week's time, remember?"

Sunny made a sour face, then looked away.

"Believe me, I remember. I am going to train hard."

Kai gripped his shoulder for a moment — well, the top of one of his lower arms that were in reach, anyway — and then, the two walked away without saying anything else. There was no need to say goodbye.

With them gone, Sunny suddenly felt a bit… lost.

Shaking his head, he threw stupid thoughts out of his head and walked to the center of the garden, intending to spend the rest of the day practicing with the Cruel Sight. Saint would have probably healed enough to be summoned, too… so, he had his work cut out for him.

Finding a secluded spot near the clear lake, Sunny went through the intense set of steps and exercises that he had developed to condition his body for the Shadow Dance. Of course, that had been in his human body. The shadowspawn, meanwhile, was a very different beast… or rather, devil.

Despite its size, the gaunt body of the devil was incredibly nimble and swift. It was also capable of bursts of monstrous, explosive strength that would leave many people stunned. In addition, it was itself a weapon — with his talons, claws, fangs, and horns, Sunny was capable of delivering a lot of damage even unarmed.

He could even kill things with the spike at the end of his tail.

After that initial practice session, he summoned Saint and started the real training.

As they sparred, Sunny observed the departure of the inhabitants of the Sanctuary. They left in a column, with Kai in the front, and Effie walking behind. Some were carrying their meager belongings, while some were empty-handed. Some cried, while some remained silent and stoic.

Some even smiled.

Above them, the flying ship moved, carrying those who could not walk. Sunny could not see, but knew that Cassie was controlling it. For a moment, he was curious about how she was able to communicate with the Sailor Dolls… however, that short distraction cost him dearly when Saint delivered a painful blow to his abdomen, and so, Sunny decided to concentrate on himself.

Turning his full attention back to the training fight, he thought:

'I wish them well… even if they are not real, I wish them all the best…'

Long hours passed in arduous training. Slowly but surely, he was growing accustomed to the new proportions of his strange and powerful body. His height, his reach, his might… all of it was starting to click, making him feel confident in his own skin once more.

At some point, dead tired, Sunny decided to take a break. Commanding Saint to stand down, he crouched near the lake and drew some water to wash the sweat off his face. Then, he poured some on his head and sighed, looking at the clear surface of the lake.

The graceful figure of Saint reflected on it, and near her, his own. Obsidian skin, bestial features, eyes that seemed like pools of liquid darkness, twisting horns… Master Jet had once joked that he would be a flower boy one day. Remembering it, Sunny smiled.

'I wonder what she would have said if she saw me that way…'

And then, he froze.

His sweat turned cold.

...There was a third reflection on the surface of the lake.

It was a tall and slender young man, with pale skin and raven-black hair. His face was sharp and thin — not exactly handsome, but at the same time charming and strangely beautiful. His striking eyes didn't seem to possess a color of their own, and instead reflected the world back on itself like two pools of liquid silver.

Currently, they were as blue as the boundless, vast sky.

The young man smiled pleasantly, and then raised a hand in greeting.

A painfully familiar voice suddenly resounded in Sunny's mind.

"Ah, Sunless… how nice it is to meet you again, after all this time. Just look at you… goodness! I almost failed to recognize you behind that fearsome face…"

# Chapter-711: A Simple Task

Hearing Mordret's pleasant voice reminded Sunny of the time they had shared in the Sky Below, and the closeness that had existed between them back then. A long time ago, he had considered the mysterious prince if not a friend, then at least an ally. He had been fond of the owner of the disembodied voice enough to worry when it disappeared.

Of course, all of that had been a lie. A masterfully crafted net of deception that Mordret had created to lure Sunny into bringing the mirror shard into the Night Temple, and setting him free.

The memory of the dark conclusion of that story — the fear, the pain, the shame of having been led astray and betrayed... the slaughter — gripped his hearts with icy claws. Sunny glared at the reflection of the young man for a few moments, then gritted his teeth.

He hated to admit it, but there was no escaping the fact that he feared Mordret. Sunny had met many powerful men and even more terrifying abominations, but the Prince of Nothing was perhaps the only one whom he was truly scared of. Not because of the Divine Aspect or the lineage of War, but precisely because of how insidiously cunning and inexplicable the Prince of Nothing was.

It was like what Teacher Julius had said… what humans feared the most was the unknown. And no matter how many times Sunny tried, he simply could not understand how Mordret thought, what his motives were, and what was he scheming behind that friendly smile. Because of the eerie wrongness hiding in the depths of his eyes, the Prince of Nothing was impossible to predict.

Hell, he was even impossible to kill. The whole of the great clan Valor had tried, and failed.

…Grasping the Extraordinary Rock, Sunny made sure that there was

no one really standing behind him, and addressed the reflection in a gruff voice:

"...Oh. It's you. What are you doing inside the lake? Don't be a stranger, Mordret… come, enter my Soul Sea, and let's talk face to face."

The reflection of the young man lingered, its smile turning a little forced. Then, it spoke again:

"How strange… I can hear you speak, but I don't see your lips moving. Have you been learning new tricks, Sunless? Ah, good for you. I've been doing some of that myself…"

Sunny scowled, shadows veiling his eyes.

"I have… I've heard. A whole region of the kingdom, Mordret? Really? I thought you did not enjoy killing innocent people. Or did you tell yourself that it was alright because they were not real?"

Mordret tilted his head a little. Then, he said with the same pleasant smile:

"What would have been the point of killing them if they were not real?"

Hearing that, Sunny shivered.

The reflection, meanwhile, shook its head.

"They were real enough to serve a purpose... don't get me wrong, however. I would not have done the same in the waking world. Those I killed were all already dead, Sunless. All of them were doomed, and uselessly so. I simply gave their deaths a different meaning."

Mordret did not seem pleased with himself, but neither did he seem remorseful about slaughtering thousands of people. Just… uncaring.

Which was much more unnerving.

The Prince of Nothing looked at Sunny and chuckled:

"So, that little oracle of yours told you all about my adventures, then? Well, wonderful. I will not have to describe them myself. Time is of the essence, after all… sending a reflection across such a distance is not easy, even for me."

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then sighed and crossed his four arms.

"She did, even if I would not have used the word adventures to describe it. What do you want, Mordret?"

The reflection remained silent for a bit, then smiled.

"Why, what else? To conquer the Nightmare, of course. Don't you?"

A low growl escaped from Sunny's mouth.

"I do. Stop playing games and just tell me what it is that you want from me."

Mordret sighed.

"Well, if you insist. What I want is rather simple… which is not to say easy. I want you to keep Noctis alive, at all costs."

Sunny blinked.

'What is he trying to make me do… does he really want me to protect Noctis, or is he hoping that I will do the opposite of what he wants and kill Noctis instead? Why would he want Noctis dead before the war even started? No, wait… maybe he really does want Noctis to live… argh! Damned Mordret… I hate that lying bastard!'

He stared at the reflection with a dark expression, and then said evenly:

"Is that all?"

The Prince of Nothing smiled:

"Yes, that is all. If you can accomplish this simple task, I can guarantee that we will conquer the Nightmare and escape it alive."

Sunny snorted.

"You can guarantee it, can you? How? What are you planning? What about Hope, will you try to free her, or have you found a way to restore her prison to its original state?"

A gust of wind suddenly disturbed the surface of the lake, and the reflection of the banished prince became distorted, swaying with the water.

He spoke again, his voice sounding a little distant.

"Ah, how inconvenient. It seems that I have run out of essence… until we meet again, Sunless..."

Sunny clenched his fists.

"This again? Disappearing just when you have to answer a question… bastard, you do understand that we are on the same side right now? We can kill each other after we Ascend… but first, we need to survive the Nightmare!"

Mordret laughed, his voice growing ethereal and almost inaudible.

"...not… a bastard. Ah, I wish I was…"

With that, he was gone. The reflection disappeared from the surface of the lake, and Sunny was left alone once more.

He glared at the clear water for some time, then grimaced.

"A simple task… as if anyone can keep up with that lunatic, let alone keep him alive…"

With that, he gritted his teeth and rose to his feet.

It was time to continue his training. Time was short...

# Chapter-712: Leaving the Sanctuary

A few days passed.

The Sanctuary stood empty and silent. The beautiful garden was devoid of its usual liveliness, and the winds howled as they passed through the ring of giant menhirs. Here and there, mundane things left behind by the people that had departed in a hurry lay, forlorn and forgotten. No one was ever going to return for them.

Sunny had never seen the Sanctuary this desolate and hollow… not in the future and not now, in the distant past. The sight of it was sad and eerie.

He had spent these days training tirelessly and learning to control his new body. This latest transformation had not been as fundamental as becoming a demon after living his whole life as a human, so his progress was swift. More than that, mastery of Shadow Dance made Sunny especially attuned to his physicality and change.

In truth, he did not need a whole week to achieve the goal. But practicing with Saint reminded him of the simpler times, and so, helped him prepare himself for the battle ahead mentally.

…On one of the last nights he had to spend in peace, Sunny woke up suddenly, thinking that he had heard a distant scream. Had he really, or was it just a vestige of a dream?

He sat up and glanced into the window, a deep scowl appearing on his face.

'What dream, you fool? Awakened don't dream…'

But who could have screamed in the Sanctuary? There were only two

people left here. Sunny himself…

And Noctis.

He hesitated for a moment, and then stood up, summoning the Puppeteer's Shroud. After thinking for a bit, he also summoned the Cruel Sight, wrapped his shadows around himself, and walked outside.

The full moon shone in the night sky, drowning the world in ghostly blue light. Guided by it, Sunny walked across the empty garden and approached the residence of the sorcerer, where the immortal had disappeared to days earlier and never came back out.

The door stood open, and the Sailor Dolls guarded it silently, their wooden faces devoid of any sign of worry.

Passing between them, Sunny entered the residence and studied the familiar chamber. It had changed slightly… the stone floor was even more broken and littered with deep cracks, the piles of shards had grown taller.

However, there were no tremors running through it from time to time anymore, as if whatever it was that had hidden beneath had either died, fallen into a slumber, or gone elsewhere.

Noctis was in the middle of the room, sitting on a pile of rubble with a pained look on his face. The sorcerer looked… unwell.

His skin was deathly pale, with dark circles under his eyes. His lustrous hair had grown dull and was disheveled. Even his elegant garments, which had always been flashy and immaculate, were now wrinkled and in disarray.

What's more, Sunny could have sworn that there… that there was something moving beneath the sorcerer's skin. It appeared for a moment, and then was gone, making him unsure if he had seen it or just imagined the whole thing.

Noticing his presence, Noctis slowly turned his head and smiled weakly.

"Ah… Sunless. You are just in time. How do I look?"

Sunny stared at him for a moment, and then said:

"You look like crap."

The sorcerer blinked a couple of times, then threw a hurt look at him.

"No, not me, you idiot! How does he look?"

With that, Noctis gestured at a Sailor Doll that stood motionlessly a few steps away.

Sunny had grown so accustomed to the silent mannequins that he did not pay the doll any attention after registering its presence and position. Now, he took a closer look and raised his eyebrows, confused by what he saw.

The Sailor Doll was about the same height as Noctis, dressed in his best silks, and wearing a gorgeous black wig. It stared senselessly in front of itself and held a glass of wine.

He tilted his head, opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again.

"...What the hell?"

The sorcerer shrugged.

"Well, we are going to unexpectedly attack the Ivory City, are we not? Surely, the other Chain Lords would notice if I suddenly disappear from the Sanctuary… so, I prepared this doll to make it seem like I'm still here!"

He smiled proudly and looked at Sunny with a glint in his eyes.

Sunny covered his face with a palm for a moment.

"Do you really think that this… thing… will fool anyone? Have you lost your mind? I mean, lost it even more?"

Noctis glanced at him in confusion, and then laughed.

"Oh, I forgot the last touch…"

With that, he raised his hands and clapped them a couple of times. A moment later…

There were two sorcerers in the chamber, one sitting on the pile of rubble, the other standing a few meters away and staring at Sunny with an obnoxious smile. Even though he knew that the second one was just a Sailor Doll, he couldn't tell the difference.

"How about now?"

Sunny gulped.

"Yeah… it looks fine."

The Sailor Doll remained motionless for a bit, then raised the glass of wine to its lips, pretending to drink. The likeness was uncanny… but more than that, Sunny could feel that the real enchantment went much deeper than just looks. He could actually feel a suffocating presence radiating from the mannequin, similar to what he had felt on the Iron Hand island from Noctis himself.

Looking beneath the surface of the Sailor Doll, he was stunned to see something that looked exactly like a Transcendent soul core burning in its chest. Sunny slowly inhaled.

If Cassie were to look at the mannequin, would she have seen an Aspect Name and a list of Attributes?

"...Better than fine. It is very convincing."

Noctis grinned, then rose to his feet with a grimace. Once again, it seemed as if something moved under his skin… but a second later, he seemed fine.

"Good. Well then… one last thing left to do before we leave. Follow me."

Sunny threw one last look at the broken floor of the stone chamber, and then turned around.

He knew that he would never return here again.

Together, the two of them entered the garden and walked across it. Sunny did not know where Noctis was leading him, but felt that it was important. One of the Sailor Dolls followed them, carrying something heavy.

As they walked, the sorcerer suddenly spoke:

"I thought a lot about what you have told me, Sunless. About wanting to return home."

Sunny glanced at him with surprise, but did not say anything.

Noctis remained silent for a few moments, and then said in a wistful tone:

"I used to have a home too, you know? A long time ago. There was a beautiful temple where my siblings and I grew up, being taught by priests and priestesses. It was surrounded by a vast forest where we played and hunted. There was a lake where we caught fish and swam to escape the summer's heat, without a care in the world."

The smile slowly disappeared from his face, and his eyes shone softly, reflecting the pale moonlight.

"...I returned to that place some time ago. Ah, but it was not... it changed. The temple lay in ruins, the forest had been chopped down. The lake had dried up. Everything felt unfamiliar and strange, like a distant dream.

And for a moment, I felt as if my whole life was just a dream that I have dreamt... and maybe was dreaming still."

He paused, sighed heavily, then suddenly smiled and looked at Sunny.

"But hey, by then, I already had this. This sanctuary that I have built with my own two hands, the people that I saved, the land that I tried to protect, the duty I made mine to uphold… this was my home."

He inhaled deeply and looked around, enjoying the sight of the

Sanctuary…

Sunny suddenly realized that the sorcerer was, perhaps, seeing it for the last time.

His face grew heavy.

After a few moments, Noctis said:

"What I am trying to say, Sunless, is that you don't need to belong somewhere, or to something. You just need to make something belong to you. That is how you can find home…"

The sorcerer hesitated, and then added with a proud look on his face:

"...I mean it as a metaphor, of course."

Sunny looked at him for a long time, then smiled.

"That was a great metaphor."

Noctis grinned.

"It was, wasn't it? Well, why wouldn't it be? I am the most learned man in all of the Kingdom of Hope, after all!"

At that moment, they passed between the menhirs and approached the edge of the island, where the ugly monstrosities that Noctis had called statues of him stood. There were fourteen of them, each at least twice as tall as Sunny and cut of solid marble. He had not looked at the fruits of the sorcerer's labor after that first time, and was momentarily disturbed.

If the first statue could have been remotely called an image of a person, the rest of them, without of doubt, resembled terrifying abominations much more. They were giant and heavy, with talons, claws, fangs, spikes, and horns that made Sunny's own look pathetic in comparison. The giant gargoyles looked frightening, unsightly, ferocious...

And each had mighty stone wings.

Surrounded by monuments of harrowing creatures, he suddenly felt small and weak.

Feeling uneasy, Sunny glanced at Noctis and asked:

"These are… statues of you?"

The sorcerer laughed.

"Oh… well… I might have lied a little. These were never meant to look like me."

With that, a Sailor Doll silently appeared from the darkness, carrying a heavy box that was wrapped in thick, heavy chains.

As soon as Sunny saw the box, he felt his heart turn cold, and muffled whispers invade his ears. Involuntarily, he took a step back.

"What… the hell… is in that thing?"

Noctis calmly took the box, which trembled slightly, as if something inside was trying to break free. At the same time, Sunny thought that he noticed a movement under the sorcerer's skin.

The immortal grimaced, and then said:

"...Souls. A few especially vile souls that I have collected across the centuries."

Sunny scowled, gripping the Cruel Sight tighter.

"And what, exactly, are you planning to do with these souls?"

Noctis glanced at him, smiled, and then easily tore the heavy chains keeping the box shut.

"What else? I am going to create a few little helpers for you and your strange friends. What, were you really going to take on the armies of the Ivory City and the Red Colosseum all by yourself? By the Moon, Sunless… I do trust in your abilities, but what would people say if I turned out to be the only Chain Lord without an army? How would that look? Ah, no, such an embarrassment would simply not do…"

With that, he opened the box, his eyes shining with cold moonlight.

…And in the next moment, the fourteen terrifying stone beasts suddenly moved.

# Chapter-713: War Drums

The flying ship was moving through the deep darkness of the Sky Below, escorted by fourteen stone fiends. With the ocean of flames burning below and vast nothingness above, it seemed as though they were sailing through purgatory.

Noctis stood at the steering oars, slouched, with a pale face and dark circles under his eyes. He did not seem to be doing too well, but his hand was steady as it controlled the ship.

On the upper deck, the Sailor Dolls were preparing for battle. They were moving wooden ballistae into position and loading heavy bolts into them, with an especially fearsome siege engine placed at the bow. The bolts themselves were not that simple, either. Their surfaces were carved with runes, which shimmered with stored soul essence and brimmed with power.

The mannequins themselves were armed, as well, their elegant liveries replaced with chainmail. They carried heavy bows, sabers, and hatchets — both to kill the enemies and defend the ship from boarding hooks. There were plenty of quivers full of arrows around, as well as barrels of water to douse the flames should the sails catch on fire.

The sails, meanwhile, were turned at a strange angle to catch the hot air rising from below, surrounding the vessel from the sides like wings.

The ship was flying swiftly, but in the emptiness of the Sky Below, it was hard to measure how much distance they were covering. Sunny could only tell that their speed was tremendous because of the powerful torrent of essence flowing through the ancient wood, and the howling of the wind that was being cut by the armored ram of the ship.

At this rate, they were going to reach the Ivory City soon.

The cohort was preparing for battle, too.

Kai had summoned his white and gold armor — a Memory he had earned while commanding a centuria of the Sun Legion. Behind the charred wooden mask, his eyes were serious and focused. He was examining the fletching of arrows in his quiver, a mighty bow resting at his feet. This bow had come from a champion of the War Sect he had slain, and was a deadly weapon.

Effie was standing nearby, leaning on the runic spear Sunny had given her. The Dusk Shard was propped against the board of the ship, almost as tall as the little girl, and there was a white cape that seemed to be weaved from starlight resting on her shoulders — the Starlight Shard, which she had received after slaying the Lord of the Dead.

Of course, Effie had a whole arsenal of other Memories at her disposal — those that she had collected over the years on the Forgotten Shore, and those she received for slaying countless abominations to saturate her Awakened core before venturing into the Seed of Nightmare. Weapons, tools, charms… she was going to summon them when the need arose.

Knowing that the battle ahead would be long and arduous, the little girl was hungrily devouring a pile of roasted meat.

Cassie was quietly observing Noctis, her hand resting on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer. Her role in the approaching battle was going to be especially important… when the sorcerer clashed with Solvane and Sun Prince, she would have to control the flying ship and command the Sailor Dolls, drawing the bulk of the enemy's ire.

…Sunny was getting ready, too.

He had summoned the Mantle of the Underworld, which covered his demonic body like an onyx carapace. Since this battle was going to be against humans, and not mighty Nightmare Creatures, he had judged that its utility would be more valuable than the impregnable defense of the Undying Chain.

There was no Elyas around to heal a mortal wound should he receive one, as well, so its incredible enchantment was less useful.

The Blood Blossom rested in the onyx armor's breastplate, ready to grant him its strength. In his four hands, he held the Cruel Sight, the Midnight Shard, and Morgan's Warbow.

Three Shadows rested in his soul, ready to be sent forth to destroy and slaughter.

He was ready…

Well, as ready as he could be.

Just as Sunny thought it, Noctis suddenly moved, and then looked up, a wild smile slowly appearing on his lips. His voice sounded hoarse, but clear:

"...Ah. They finally sensed us."

The members of the cohort turned to him, their faces calm and collected.

The sorcerer grinned, and then moved one of the oars, sending the ship flying up. His eyes glinted with distant moonlight.

"No point in hiding anymore. We are close enough, anyway… oh, what a night to be alive, my friends!"

His laughter rolled across the deck as the ancient vessel climbed higher and higher, swiftly approaching the dark side of the Chained Island.

Sunny stared up, knowing that just in a few minutes, the end of this Nightmare was going to begin.

...As he did, Cassie silently approached him and stood nearby for a few moments, silent.

Then, she said:

"No matter what happens… don't let him enter the Tower."

Sunny frowned, looking at her with a somber expression.

"Who? Noctis?"

She lingered for a second, and then shook her head.

"No. Mordret."

Sunny smiled and turned away.

"Why? Was his guarantee of conquering the Nightmare if we do as he says a lie?"

The young woman did not speak for a while, then said simply:

"No. I don't think so."

Sunny glanced at her and raised an eyebrow.

"Why should I try to stop him, then?"

She hesitated for a moment. Then, Cassie asked:

"What happens after the Nightmare?"

Sunny sighed, then chuckled wryly.

"...Alright. I'll take your request into consideration."

He could already see the dark underbelly of the Kingdom of Hope above them… and hear the distant whisper of war drums.

Caught by surprise, the two armies were hurriedly preparing to meet them.

Looking at his friends, Sunny sighed, and then said in a neutral voice:

"I guess this is it. Good luck, guys. Don't die out there."

Kai and Effie looked at him, and then nodded. The little girl smiled crookedly.

"Why would we die? It's just a couple of armies and three

Transcendents. No big deal…"

She hesitated for a bit, and then added in a somber tone:

"However, let's make a promise to not do suicidal battles beneath giant towers again, okay? I mean, at this rate, it might become a habit…"

Sunny looked at her and grinned.

"So, what… next time, we should do battle on top of a giant tower?"

Effie sighed.

"No... no towers. Let's try to avoid giant towers in the future entirely. How does that sound?"

Sunny laughed, then turned away and stared at the approaching islands.

"Sounds fine to me… can't promise anything, though..."

# Chapter-714: Dread Naught

As the silver circle of the full moon reached the highest point in the sky, a sudden movement tore through the darkness of the night. In the clamor of drums and human voices, an armada of wooden ships flew forward, each vessel illuminated by the orange flame of lanterns. Some had red sails, and some had white. In the pale moonlight, all of them looked grey and colorless.

The ships rushed forward, seeming like a river of lights. On their decks, human figures moved, feverishly preparing for battle. The soldiers were drawing their weapons and nocking arrows on the strings of their bows, while the captains stared at the radiant moon, their faces tense and grim.

…Soon, a lonesome black dot appeared on the surface of the silver disk, and then slowly grew as it drew closer. A single ship, this one much larger and more graceful than the rest of them, was fearlessly flying to meet the luminous armada. There was a beautiful tree growing around its mast, and a man with pale skin and raven black hair standing at the oar, guiding the vessel forward.

His eyes were grey and clear, shining with the reflected light of the moon.

Standing near Noctis, Sunny could not help but feel a dark resentment grip his hearts.

'Curse it…'

They had chosen the time of the attack to catch the armies of the Chain Lords unprepared. Most of the soldiers were still on march to the Ivory City, their formation broken and in disarray. It was not easy to unite two large forces, and Noctis had chosen the precise moment when the chaos was at its worst to stage his assault.

And yet, there was still a considerable force ready to defend the city. At least a hundred ships rose into the air to intercept and destroy them, each carrying dozens of warriors — some of them Awakened, and some even Ascended… but all the absolute elite the warring factions had to offer.

And somewhere out there, two immortal Transcendents were waiting to take their turn.

That is what Noctis and the cohort were up against.

Sunny lingered for a moment, and then glanced past the approaching river of lights, at the distant shapes of the Ivory City. It was as beautiful during the night as it was during the day… the graceful arches of the tall aqueducts, the aerial bridges that connected the islands, the buildings made of white stone...

The streets of the city were empty, but he could feel thousands of frightened souls trembling behind the walls that they had considered solid and safe. Not knowing what calamity he, and his friends, were bringing to their doorstep.

Suddenly grim, he had to remind himself that these were the people that had tried to sacrifice Kai to satiate a dragon's hunger, and then burned him alive for daring to survive.

And the dragon himself was there, too, powerless for now… at least until the dawn came.

Gritting his teeth, he took a step forward and closed his eyes for a moment.

'Just a hundred ships… what is there to fear? I just have to bring ten or twenty down. Maybe kill a few Ascendents. Big deal…'

The armada was already close enough to make out the distant shapes of humans rushing on the decks. A gust of wind brought with it a chorus of voices. Sunny shuddered, recognizing the familiar chant.

…Glory! Glory! Glory!

He opened his lightless eyes, all doubt and remorse disappearing

from them. Leaving behind only the cold will to kill.

Somewhere behind him, Noctis suddenly grinned, and then whispered in a hoarse voice:

"Now… witness us, gods..."

A moment later, the massive siege engine standing at the bow of the ship suddenly rang, sending a heavy bolt flying through the darkness. As it pierced the sky, a weave of ancient runes shone on its surface, and the winds howled, cut by its sharp blades.

Streaking toward the distant armada like a falling star, the bolt struck the hull of the forward vessel… and crushed straight through it, pulverizing a large part of the bow. It tore through the innards of the enemy ship, and then, an explosion of pale light suddenly illuminated the vessel from within for a split second, leaving behind nothing but a cloud of bloody debris.

The whole ship was destroyed in an instant.

Noctis laughed madly, and as he did, the Sailor Dolls were already rushing to reload the engine. While they were busy with it, the sorcerer moved one of the oars, throwing his own ship into a turn to let its port side, and the loaded ballistae situated there, face the rushing enemy fleet.

…And, just like that, the battle that was meant to change the course of history forever started.

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The sorcerer's ship had an advantage in size, speed, power of enchantments, and the reach of its weapons. However, the difference was not insurmountable. Before the bow engine could be reloaded, they would already be being pelted by arrows and harpoons of the enemy.

"Get ready, my friends!"

The Sailor Dolls pulled the levers of the portside ballistae, sending several smaller, but still devastating bolts flying toward the

approaching armada. Others readied their bows, staring forward with indifferent wooden faces.

Sunny raised Morgan's Warbow, ready to draw it, and threw a question over his shoulder:

"What of Solvane? What of Sun Prince?"

Noctis smiled wickedly.

"Can't you feel? They are approaching. Song of the Fallen, my lady… I am afraid you will have to take the oars soon. Do not worry, however. As long as the moon shines, I will make easy work of those two."

He lingered for a moment, sending the ship into another turn, and then added:

"Do worry about the enemy ships, though. If you are not careful, they will tear my beauty apart in no time… not to mention peppering you full of arrows."

The ships he mentioned were almost in range to shoot their own onagers and ballistae. Even though the sorcerer's vessel was graceful, swift, and stalwart, it seemed impossible for anything to survive the devastating rain of projectiles. Sunny tensed, his pupils narrowing into two vertical slits of pure darkness.

A few moments before the onslaught came, however, fourteen fearsome shadows suddenly flew from below the islands and flashed upward, colliding against the first row of the enemy ships. Splinters of wood and torn limbs shot into the air, and for a moment, the enemy's formation was broken.

Using that moment, Noctis sent the ship into a dive, narrowly avoiding the aim of the armada, and at the same time presenting its starboard. Another set of ballistae shot their bolts, adding to the mayhem.

The sorcerer glanced at Sunny, Effie, and Kai with a wild smile.

"It is your turn, Sunless! Now or nev…"

Then, however, he abruptly grew silent and flinched.

Noctis's face, which had already been pale, turned white as a sheet. He groaned, and then slowly turned his head, looking up with a stunned expression.

A moment later, Sunny heard the immortal let out an ominous whisper.

"Oh… this is not good… not good at all…"

Feeling a cold shiver run down his spine, Sunny turned and followed the sorcerer's gaze, up and up, into the night sky.

Then, he froze.

'W—what?'

The moon…

The moon was disappearing.

# Chapter-715: Boarding Party

Out there in the sky, the silver disk of the moon was slowly being devoured by darkness, as if drowning in a vast and impenetrable shadow. One of its edges was already gone, and with each moment, more and more of it was being erased by the shadows. It looked…

Like an eclipse.

Noctis paled, and at the same time, Sunny suddenly felt reinvigorated. It was as though every shadow in the world had just become deeper and darker, and as one of them, he did, too. The feeling was strange and euphoric.

But Sunny knew that this eclipse was an ill omen for all of them.

Turning to the sorcerer, he asked:

"What is going on?"

Noctis stared at the disappearing moon with a dark expression, and then shivered.

"I… I guess Sevras had a trick of his own up his sleeve. I did not expect him to get his hands on a piece of Shadow's domain, though… how is this even possible?"

Seeing a lost expression on the sorcerer's face, Sunny growled:

"How severe is your Flaw? How weak are you going to be when the moon is fully gone? What do we do now?!"

The fleet of the Ivory City was still closing the distance to obliterate them, so there was no time to waste. They had a few moments before the clash, at best. He had to know what was going on…

Noctis glanced at the dimming moon for one more second, then

turned away and sighed.

"Well…"

A pale smile appeared on his lips.

"...Do you guys remember how I told you that I will take care of both Solvane and Sun Prince while you distract their armies?"

The sorcerer's smile grew wider, a mad glint appearing in his eyes.

"Change of plans! You will have to keep the Prince busy for a bit, too. I, uh… will try to deal with Solvane. Best of luck to you, my friends! And to me, as well…"

With that, he stepped out of the magical circle and gestured for Cassie to grab the oars, which she hurriedly did. A moment later, Noctis was already standing on the bort of the ship, his raven black hair dancing in the wind.

Sunny opened his eyes wide and screamed:

"Wait! How the hell are we supposed to keep a Transcendent busy?!"

The sorcerer threw a quick glance over his shoulder and laughed.

"I don't know! Figure something out… try to stab him with my knife, maybe? No, stabbing that steel behemoth won't do anything…"

With that, he simply took a step forward and fell down, disappearing in the darkness and the howling wind without a trace.

Just like that, Noctis was gone.

Sunny stared at the empty space where the sorcerer had been just a moment ago with a stunned expression. His momentary stupor was broken by Cassie's shout:

"Sunny! There are only a few seconds left! What do we do?!"

The blind girl was controlling the flying ship, desperately trying to right its course so that it wouldn't take the full brunt of the armada's

siege weapons all at once. Sunny had no idea how she was able to fly the ancient vessel without being able to see, and it did not matter right now. He hesitated for a moment, then turned away and let out a resentful growl.

"We follow the plan. Nothing really changed…"

Effie raised the Dusk Shard and asked, her voice grim:

"What about the big bastard?"

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"Last I checked, that monstrosity cannot fly. As long as we stay in the air, we should be fine…"

Cassie pushed one of the oars down, then frowned. Her voice sounded hesitant:

"But how do we stop him from going after Noctis?"

He looked at her, then cursed.

"No idea! Shoot him with the damned bolt thrower! The big one!"

With that, Sunny left the blind girl behind and rushed forward.

The enemy ships were already close… close enough for him to feel shadows dancing on their decks.

Which meant that it was time for him, Effie, and Kai to join the fight…

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A large fleet was closing in on a swift vessel, its formation in a mess because of the fourteen ghastly stone abominations wreaking havoc on the flying ships. Each of the massive gargoyles bore the soul of a vile Corrupted creature, so their might and ferocity were terrifying — not entirely on par with the original fiends that Noctis had slain, but close to it.

And yet, they alone were not enough. In fact, the fourteen gargoyles were merely a distraction.

The main strike was yet to come.

As the graceful ship came within range of the fleet's siege weapons, it dove down, and at the same time, several figures jumped off its deck into the air.

A few moments later, the air was suddenly filled with the smell of blood.

The captain of one of the vessels shouted something, pointing upward. Then, however, he swayed and fell down, his neck pierced by an arrow. At the same time, something fell from above… it was a young girl carrying a heavy round shield. Just above her, a man in a charred wooden mask hovered in the air, already drawing the string of his bow once again.

Effie, who had been tossed down by Kai, hit the deck of the ship, slid on the Dusk Shard for a moment, then rolled and jumped to her feet, the runic spear in her hand glowing with an angry red light. That shine only grew brighter when the spear pierced a man's chest and was painted with crimson blood.

As another Awakened toppled over with a scream, struck down by an arrow. Effie twisted and shook her spear, throwing the corpse of her first victim at the rushing enemies. Her shield flashed, its rim crushing someone's chest. Then, an enemy blade fell from above, landing on her shoulder… and bounced off her skin, not leaving behind even a scratch.

A split second later, the attacker was already dead, and the young girl continued her slaughter, fighting like a demon released from the depths of hell… like a perfect vessel of war.

There were only two pupils of the Red Sect left alive in the whole world, after all. One of them was Solvane…

And the other was here on the ship, killing Solvane's followers one after another with a feral grin on her childish face.

If warriors on the other vessels of the fleet could have seen what was happening, they would have felt lucky to be safe from the little beast and her guardian's deadly arrows…

But their relief would have been misplaced. Because the young warrior and the flying archer were not the only ones boarding the flying ships.

Much more terrifying than them…

Were the coming shadows.

# Chapter-716: Head of the Snake

A swift figure streaked across the sky, and then, a black steed landed on the deck of a flying ship, its eyes burning with crimson light. The stallion had a coat that was as black as night, two horns of adamantine metal, and fangs that resembled those of a wolf.

On its back rode a graceful knight clad in onyx armor, the scarlet blade of her odachi matching two ruby lights shining behind the visor of her closed helmet. Without pause, the dark rider sent her steed forward, and her sword flashed, beheading the nearest warrior of the Sun Legion in one smooth strike.

The other Awakened froze for a moment, suddenly grasped by a cold feeling of dread.

And as fear crawled into their hearts, the terrifying crimson flames burning in the eyes of the tenebrous stallion ignited even brighter. It moved its head, biting into the neck of another soldier and tearing it wide open. More blood flowed onto the deck...

On another ship, the soldiers suddenly screamed and aimed their bows up as a massive shadow suddenly covered the deck.

But they were too late.

As a gale of wind raised by mighty wings threw some of them off their feet, a repulsive creature crashed into the deck. It resembled a giant lion with the head of a raven, its body gaunt and entirely black. The creature had two powerful hind legs and six limbs protruding from its wide chest, each ending with a set of long talons.

Lean muscles were rolling under its skin like worms, and its terrifying beak was open, revealing rows of sharp, needle-like fangs and a long tongue. Both the fangs and the tongue were of the same black color as the rest of the abominable monstrosity.

Using the momentary shock of the warriors, the Soul Serpent, who had assumed the form of a Spire Messenger, reached out with its six arms and sliced six bodies apart with its talons. Blood sprayed into the air, and a chilling, ghastly wail escaped from its beak.

…And lastly, on the stern of yet another ship, a towering devil wearing black armor simply appeared out of the shadow, silently and without anyone noticing him for a split second.

That one second was enough for a bolt of lightning to fly off his bow and hit a warrior in red armor that had been preparing to pull the lever of a ballista on the bow of the ship. Instantly, arcs of furious radiance chained to a dozen nearest soldiers, killing several, burning a few, and stunning the rest.

Dismissing Morgan's Warbow, Sunny dashed forward and brandished the Cruel Sight, as well as the austere tachi he held in the other two of his four hands. He knew that his time was short… yes, Sunny was powerful, and so were his Shadows. But when the defenders of the Ivory City recovered from the initial shock, they were going to show that each of them was an Awakened, too.

And then, who knew how long he would be able to survive?

The first thing to do was to cut off the head of the snake…

Ramming into a tall soldier with his shoulder, Sunny sent him flying away and raised the Midnight Shard for a devastating downward slash. The captain of the ship — a grey-haired man with a noble face and a thick beard — reacted too fast, throwing his own sword up to block the attack.

However, the tachi never came down… if Sunny really wanted to attack it with it, he would have never telegraphed his strike so clearly. Instead, the Cruel Sight shot forward from below, piercing the captain through the chest. Infused with divine flame, it easily went through his armor and flesh, killing the man on the spot.

The Warmonger only had time to look at Sunny with eyes clouded by pain… and smile happily. Then, he fell down like a tree that had been cut down by an axe.

'Damned crazies…'

The captain was dead, which would make things easier for Sunny. However, there were still dozens of Awakened warriors on the deck of the ship, now fully aware of his presence and clamoring to spill his blood. Sunny had fought plenty of Solvane's followers in the Red Colosseum, and knew very well how skilled and powerful they were.

He was not sure of his ability to survive a battle against that many, especially now that he had no shadows augmenting his body.

Three of them were with Saint, Serpent, and Nightmare, and the fourth one lay on the bloodied deck behind him to serve as his eyes. With the enemy possessing such a terrible numeric advantage, he judged that being aware of his surroundings would be more useful than a bit of physical might.

…Regardless, Sunny was not going to fight them all unless he absolutely had to.

Throwing the captain's corpse out of his way with a powerful kick, Sunny dashed forward… and grabbed one of the steering oars the man had been holding.

He might not have known how to fly a ship, but from watching Noctis and Cassie do it, he at least knew how to crash one.

As the Shadow Lantern appeared on his belt and devoured all light nearby, thus hiding him in a cloud of darkness and making it harder for the archers to hit him, Sunny pulled the steering oar all the way to the right.

Slowly, the flying ship started to turn left, going off course and breaking formation.

A few arrows zipped past Sunny, one bouncing off his helmet and throwing his head back. He could see ten or so of the closest Warmongers already running at him, and further back, even more rushing to join their comrades. Those who had been stunned by the Strike of Thunder were coming to their senses, as well.

'Crap…'

Forced to keep the oar in place and thus immobilized, he gritted his teeth and threw the Cruel Sight as a javelin, aiming to kill the nearest of the approaching enemies. However, his spear simply froze in the air, as if the attackers were surrounded by an invisible barrier.

In the next moment, a ball of furious light invaded the cloud of darkness that protected him, dimming somewhat, but not disappearing instantly.

That was the problem with fighting against Awakened… every one of them had an Aspect, and each Aspect was unique, making them excruciatingly unpredictable and hard to deal with.

As more arrows were aimed at his head, Sunny cursed, let go of the oar… and dissolved into shadows.

Left with no one to hold it in place, the steering oar returned to its natural position.

...But the damage was already done.

Before anyone could get to it, the flying ship careened… and rammed straight into the side of another one, piercing it with the metal beak of the forward ram and wedging itself deep into the allied vessel.

Both ships were heavily damaged by the collision, but the situation was still not unsalvageable. If an experienced captain acted with haste, at least one, or maybe even both vessels could be saved.

…But before that could happen, a four-armed demon suddenly appeared from the shadows on the stern of the rammed ship.

And a few moments later, its captain was dead, too.

Just like that, Sunny had doomed two ships and a hundred souls to death with two strikes of his weapons.

He glanced into the night sky for a moment and groaned.

'Just ninety-something or so left... great!'

A muffled, mad laugh suddenly escaped from his lips.

# Chapter-717: Slick With Blood

As a hundred souls plummeted to their deaths in a rain of wooden debris, the four-armed devil who had doomed them to death laughed madly.

Of course, he was falling with the rest… but, unlike most of the warriors on the broken ship, the devil had long grown accustomed to plummeting from great heights. After all, he had once spent a whole month falling into the endless darkness of the Sky Below.

Dissolving into the shadows, Sunny appeared on the deck of the nearest ship. His sword flashed, ending the life of a Sun Legion soldier that stood in his way and sending blood spraying into the night air. There was only a moment before the enemies would shrug off the shock of his sudden arrival… and so, he did not waste any time.

Lunging forward, Sunny struck another warrior in the back with the Cruel Sight, slashed the Midnight Shard across the throat of an enemy archer, and wrapped his tail around the neck of a third soldier. Sending the last one overboard with a powerful throw, he bared his teeth and briefly glanced into the night sky.

Out there in the lightless void, Effie and Kai had managed to slaughter the entire crew of one of the ships and sent the vessel crashing into the rest of the formation. The little girl jumped off the rails at the last moment, and the swift archer caught her, carrying both of them away, toward the next target.

The ship where Saint and Nightmare landed was silent and dark, with not a soul moving on it. Everyone was already dead, and the vessel was careening to the side, ready to plummet down. The black courser galloped across the bloody deck and soared into the sky, breaching a gap of a hundred meters with a single jump and landing among fearful Awakened on a different ship. Saint's scarlet odachi flashed…

The Soul Serpent crashed on the deck of another flying vessel, the previous one he had visited breaking apart as it fell into the darkness. Before the warriors could react to the appearance of the ghastly abomination, its shape suddenly shifted, turning into a mass of liquid darkness.

Then, the darkness flowed into a figure of a menacing knight, his black armor forged from a lusterless, anthracite steel and decorated with intricate engravings. The great sword of the knight rose and fell like a guillotine, severing flesh and bone.

Sunny grinned.

'Not bad…'

Effie and Kai had taken out two ships, while he and his Shadows took out four. The gargoyles had destroyed even more… at this rate, obliterating the entire fleet was not going to be as impossible as it had seemed.

But, of course, that was just an illusion.

The main reason for that was a simple but inescapable fact… that their reserves of essence were not going to last that long. Every time Sunny used Shadow Step to travel between ships, he wasted a big chunk of his… not to mention the fact that using multiple active enchantments at the same time was constantly draining it, as well. The Shadow Lantern was especially gluttonous.

Every time Serpent killed an enemy, a small amount of essence flowed into Sunny's cores. However, the formless Shadow was consuming its own essence at a terrible speed — not only did it have to expend it to maintain the form of other creatures, but using their Abilities had a cost, too. The Soul Serpent was not going to be able to keep it up for long.

The second reason was that for now, the cohort had the element of surprise on their side. As soon as the fleet realized what was happening, taking down the ships were going to grow much, much harder.

So, all Sunny could do was deliver as much damage as he could, as fast as he could… and then hope for a miracle.

Of course, with his luck, chances were that he would have to create that miracle himself.

…Killing another enemy, Sunny threw his corpse aside and dashed toward the captain of the ship, hoping to slay him and sow discord in the coordination of the vessel's crew.

However, this time, he failed to behead the snake with one swift strike — the officer of the Sun Legion that commanded the ship deflected his attack with frightening ease, and then delivered a blow of his own, throwing Sunny back.

An angry hiss escaped from his lips.

'Damnation!'

The captain… was an Ascended, and one of remarkable might, as well.

Throwing a quick glance at the dozens of warriors surrounding him, Sunny gritted his teeth…

And fought.

He fought, fought, fought… as he had in front of the Gate in the waking world, surrounded from all sides by Nightmare Creatures… using everything he had, every trick and deception he could muster, and every little bit of skill and experience he had earned in the past years.

Soon, the deck of the ship grew slick with blood, most of it human, but not all.

There were a few drops of his own mixed into it, as well, shining with the invisible light of divinity.

Sunny killed as many enemies as he could, and then killed even more. The Mantle of the Underworld rang as a rain of blows landed on it, a few blades finding their way through the thin cracks and

biting into his flesh. He spun and danced, reaping lives and jumping through shadows to avoid being entirely surrounded. The Awakened warriors were bad enough…

But their Ascended captain was simply a menace. No matter what Sunny did, the man simply shrugged off all the attacks and pursued, closing distance in a split second no matter how far away from him Sunny jumped. This could not go on any longer…

'I… I need to kill this bastard… now…'

Once again forced to cross blades with the Ascended and struggling to withstand the blow, Sunny activated the [Gates of Shadow] enchantment, drowning his immediate surrounding in darkness. The soldiers stumbled, failing to adjust in time. The Ascended, however, had already learned of this ability of his and continued to attack, as though his eyes could adapt to the lack of light.

This would have been very bad for Sunny... if he had not counted on exactly that fact.

Deactivating the enchantment abruptly, he poured his essence into the Cruel Sight instead. Instantly, the darkness was replaced by a flash of brilliant sunlight. The captain might have been able to adjust his eyes to see in the dark… but could he do the reverse in an instant?

Surprised by the sudden burst of radiant light, the Ascended was blinded for a second. And a second was all Sunny needed…

Guided by shadow sense, his spear shot forward, and pierced the man's heart. A pulse of divine flame was all it took to make the terrible wound inescapably lethal.

The rest was if not easy, then at least simple. Sunny faced the remaining soldiers of the crew and slaughtered them one after another. He was this close to victory when his shadow noticed something streaking through the air, aimed at his back.

Sunny flinched, then fell sideways. In the next moment, a massive bolt flew past and struck one of the warriors in the abdomen,

throwing the man back like a rag doll and pinning him to the mast, which then exploded into splinters and toppled.

Sunny's eyes grew wider.

...It seemed that the defenders of the Ivory City had finally understood the nature of the threat facing them and responded to it.

Two more ships were hovering some distance away, both aiming their ballistae, as well as numerous arrows, at one spot…

Him.

Sunny gritted his teeth, and then dashed forward as fast as he could…

'Crap!'

# Chapter-718: Heavenly Carnage

Sunny rolled over his shoulder, and just as he did, countless arrows hit the deck in the spot where he had been just a split second ago. Sent from powerful bows made for Awakened archers, each carried enough force to pierce plate armor with ease. Of course, the Mantle of the Underworld was not just any armor…

And yet, Sunny was extremely apprehensive of the threat posed by archers. Being battered by a rain of arrows was going to take a toll on his body, and all it took was for one to slide into the slit of his visor… not to mention that there were all kinds of Aspects the enemy could possess, and all kinds of runes the bows and the arrows could be enchanted with.

The heavy javelins sent flying by the bolt throwers came next...

Streaking through the air with terrifying speed, they hit the ship like missiles. Each possessed enough momentum to tear a hole in the deck, sending an explosion of splinters into the air. Sunny was not sure if he would be able to survive being hit by something like that, so he took no risks, diving into the shadows and turning into one of them.

The wisest move right now would have been to step onto the deck of a different ship… however, only the two attacking vessels were close enough to not require a truly vast expenditure of essence to perform a jump, and their crews were undoubtedly already prepared to resist an assault.

Plus, Sunny was reluctant to leave without killing the remaining soldiers and destroying the ship completely. He had a very good reason for that.

While the gargoyles and the four boarding parties were harassing the formation and slowly whittling down the number of enemy vessels…

the fleet's main target still remained the same.

All of them were attacking the graceful ship with a beautiful tree growing around its mast, surrounding it like a murder of hungry crows.

Cassie was the fifth and final part of the cohort's assault force, and the one in the most danger. While Sunny and the rest fought with the soldiers of the defending fleet… she was battling the fleet itself.

Guided by her hand, the sorcerer's ship maneuvered between the enemy vessels, barely dodging constant shots of their harpoons and siege weapons while responding with its own attacks from time to time. The bolts sent by its ballistae were much more devastating due to runes carved into them by Noctis, taking whole chunks out of the enemy ships or obliterating them completely.

It was larger, faster, and much more durable…

But it was also alone against countless foes.

As Sunny rushed through the shadows toward the stern, he caught a glimpse of the graceful ship as it dove down, the figures of Sailor Dolls bracing themselves against rails and releasing the strings of their powerful bows. There were deep scratches on its hull and holes in its sails, dozens of arrows sticking out of the deck like needles… but it was still in one piece.

Due to Cassie's intuition and uncanny Aspect Ability, she had been able to predict and avoid the enemy attacks, at least to some degree… for now. But the pressure on the lonely ship was mounting with each second, and no matter how many enemy vessels she destroyed, this deadly aerial dance could not continue much longer.

Knowing that, the young woman threw the ship into a dive, falling from the dark sky like a star. She was leading the fleet down, toward the surface, where she would be able to maneuver between the flying islands and use their solid mass as a shield.

That was extremely dangerous, since any ship moving that low ran a risk of crashing into an island or, even worse, into one of the

heavenly chains. But Cassie had no choice… she had to limit the amount of vessels that had a direct line of sight of her ship if she wanted to turn the threat posed by the enemy's overwhelming numerical advantage from insurmountable to simply lethal.

She was barely hanging on to life…

And so, Sunny could not allow himself to leave this ship before it was disposed of completely. Sure, it was already damaged, and the few soldiers that still lived were not going to be able to both control it and mount the onagers and ballistae… but it would take just one heroic fool with a death wish to ram the damaged vessel into Cassie, taking out the main force of their small army.

Emerging from the shadows at the stern, Sunny used the second or two it took the enemy archers to notice him and take aim again to push one of the steering oars all the way up, wedge the Prowling Thorn into the wood, and then secure the handle of the oar in place with the invisible string attached to the heavy kunai.

The ship shuddered, and then its bow turned down, sending it into a downward dive. Sunny made it just in time — not a moment after he finished the task, a heavy arrow hit him in the back, sending a jolt of pain and a concussive shock running through his body.

He was roughly thrown forward and hit the deck, which was slowly turning into a vertical wall. Sunny allowed himself to slide down, dodging a few more arrows that way, and saw the remaining soldiers falling into the night sky with terrified screams.

A feral grin appeared on his face.

'Done!'

It was time for him to abandon the ship, as well…

By pure coincidence, at that very moment, the falling vessel happened to be at the same altitude as the descending ship that Cassie controlled. Pushing himself off the deck to dive into the shadows, Sunny noticed the massive siege engine on the bow of the sorcerer's ship take aim at an enemy boat. It seemed as if another

enemy was going to be destroyed in a second...

Then, however, Cassie suddenly gave up on the sure-shot and threw the ship into a desperate spin, changing course so abruptly that one of the Sailor Dolls was thrown overboard.

Sunny frowned.

'What…'

Before he could finish the thought...

The vessel he was still standing on suddenly exploded into debris as something massive tore through it at a stunning speed and then streaked through the lightless sky, missing Cassie's ship by a hair's breadth. Instead, the thing hit one of the sorcerer's gargoyles and obliterated it completely, turning the terrifying creature into a cloud of stone dust in a blink of an eye.

It was only a second later, when Sunny found himself falling down with nothing there to support his weight anymore, that he registered what the thing was.

…It was a narrow pillar of polished steel, at least fifty meters in length, that ended in a sharp point. That pillar, it looked like… like…

Like a javelin worthy of a giant.

Stunned, Sunny turned his head and looked in the direction of the Ivory City as he fell.

His eyes widened.

He did not like what he saw.

...He did not like it at all.

# Chapter-719: Dark Moon

Out there in the distance, just outside of the Ivory City, a steel colossus towered above a desolate island, his gargantuan body shrouded in darkness. The terrible wound delivered to him by Noctis was mostly repaired, with broken scaffolds hanging from the giant where he had torn himself out of them to join the battle. However, he was still missing an arm.

The face of the giant was stoic and unmoving, and his eyes drowned in deep shadows. In front of him, dozens of enormous javelins were thrust into the soil, each tall enough to dwarf a siege tower. As Sunny looked, Sun Prince calmly grabbed one of them, then pulled it out of the ground and moved his hand up, preparing to make another throw.

'...Crap!'

Plummeting down, Sunny balanced himself in the air and then dove in a certain direction. A few moments later, he crashed into a large fragment of the destroyed ship's hull and disappeared, diving into the shadows on its surface.

In a blink of an eye, Sunny rolled onto the deck of one of the two attacking vessels and jumped to his feet, ready to fight.

He could not do anything to the steel colossus… all he could do was continue playing his part and pray that Cassie manages to survive. If she failed to draw the giant's attention away from Noctis, all of them were going to die… but he could not do anything about that, either.

Sunny could make sure that there were fewer enemy ships pursuing her, however, and that was what he intended to do.

Killing things was one of his greatest talents, after all.

With a loud roar, he dashed forward, toward a battle formation of Awakened soldiers. Unlike the crews of the ships he had destroyed already, these warriors had been waiting for an attack, and so were prepared… but it would not save them.

They were still going to die.

Just a split second before the four-armed devil collided against the front row of the enemy, a sickening feeling suddenly permeated their souls, sapping their hands of strength and filling them with insidious pain. Augmented by the [Underworld Armament] enchantment of the onyx armor, the Broken Oath spread its eroding influence, slowly destroying the very souls of everyone around Sunny.

…Of course, his own soul was being damaged as well. But it was much stronger than that of mere beasts, and protected by the Mantle of the Underworld on top of that. He was not going to be able to endure the effect of the vile charm for long, but that did not matter. He just needed to last longer than his enemies.

Turning the Cruel Sight into a sword and summoning the Patient Avenger into a free hand, Sunny crashed into the formation of weakened enemies and spun, dancing as he sowed death among them. His two blades and his tail moved as if possessing their own lives, and the charred kite shield soon started to emanate an angry orange glow as a rain of strikes fell on it.

As it did, the blade of the Cruel Sight suddenly shone with incandescent white light, and the austere tachi with dim orange one. Infused with flames — one divine, the other mundane — both blades cut through steel armor as if it was made of paper. Screams of terror and agony rose above the deck of the flying ship, disappearing into the moonless night.

…Similar slaughter was happening on other ships of the fleet, as well.

Effie was rampaging on a slippery deck, moving like a wrecking ball across its blood-soaked surface. When someone tried to attack her from the back, they were killed by sharp arrows falling from the darkness. Kai moved swiftly above the ship, dodging enemy archers and never missing a kill shot. He was dealing almost as much damage

as the feral girl.

Just like what had happened to Sunny, other vessels moved to assist the one where the two were fighting. But as they did, a black steed landed on the deck of one, while a dark abomination with the head of a raven landed on another.

For a few minutes, the defensive formation was in chaos, and then, even more ships had to abandon the hunt for the graceful vessel of the traitorous sorcerer to come to their rescue.

When they did, however, the stone gargoyles attacked them, causing even more mayhem.

Some distance away, Cassie had managed to reach the Sky Below and was now being pursued in a deadly race between the flying islands, causing several of the enemy ships to break apart as they collided with the heavenly chains and allowing the Sailor Dolls to shoot several more down with the siege engines.

Down there, she was protected both from the unobstructed attacks of the fleet and from the steel giant's javelins.

For a moment, things seemed to be going well…

But that was exactly the problem.

Left without a target, the steel colossus threw two more javelins, destroying one or two gargoyles with each of throw, and then paused, his gaze traveling across the lightless islands.

Just as it did, one of them quaked viciously, and a large chunk of it suddenly crumbled, falling into the abyss of the Sky Below in a cloud of stone debris. The heavenly chain attached to it was released and whipped across the sky, pulverizing a couple of unfortunate ships that happened to be in its way.

Then, something strange happened.

The shadow devouring the moon finally spread across all of it, leaving nothing but an empty circle of darkness on the surface of the night sky. But then, that circle suddenly became infused with a dim

red glow, and the moon slowly revealed itself once again. Only now, it was not silver anymore…

Instead, the moon was red as blood, and drowned the whole world in an eerie crimson radiance.

…Still fighting on the deck of the ship and being poisoned by the soul erasure of the Broken Oath, Sunny spared a moment to glance at the sky, and then pulled his attention back to the battle. Moving through the dim crimson light, he killed another human, gritted his teeth, and then thought:

'I wonder… If this… is good news for us, or bad…'

A distance away, Sun Prince stared at the crimson moon for a few moments, as well. Then, he shifted his gaze back to the broken island…

And raised his hand, aiming a javelin at something only he could see on its dark, shattered surface.

# Chapter-720: Crimson Sky

Sunny did not know much about astronomy. However, due to being born during a solar eclipse, he knew a thing or two about eclipses… a useless piece of knowledge he had never thought would become so vital one day.

After being devoured by the shadows, the moon had turned red, which seemed like a sign of its return. However, in reality, it just meant that the moon was now fully submerged in the deepest, darkest part of the planet's shadow.

So… did Noctis get his power back? Had he grown more powerful than ever, even? Or was he currently the weakest he had ever been?

Was the damn Dream Realm even a planet?!

Sunny did not know, and had no time to wonder. He was being destroyed from the inside by the Broken Oath, and relentlessly attacked by the warriors of the Ivory City at the same time. No matter how many he killed, their tide did not seem to wane…

Well, in that case, he just had to kill even more.

Jumping back, Sunny braced himself, and then put his shoulder behind the Patient Avenger. In the next moment, a fiery explosion boomed on the deck of the ship.

…Far away, on a desolate island bordering the Ivory City, Sun Prince raised his hand and aimed the gargantuan javelin, his gaze locked on the ferocious battle between Noctis and Solvane that no one except for him was able to see. His emotionless face glistened with crimson light, reflecting the radiance of the blood moon.

'Damnation!'

Thrown down by the detonation of the flames contained within the kite shield and surrounded by a red haze, Sunny rose shakily and stared at the steel colossus, his heart growing cold. Noctis… the bastard had to be aiming at Noctis…

If the sorcerer died, they were going to die with him.

Powerless to change anything, Sunny just gritted his teeth and watched.

That was why he saw a graceful ship suddenly emerging from the darkness of the Sky Below, its bow aimed at Sun Prince. Left with no other choice, Cassie had abandoned the safety of the treacherous gaps between the islands and threw her vessel up in a desperate attempt to stall the monstrous giant.

The massive siege engine on the bow of the ship shuddered, and a heavy bolt streaked through the dark red sky, hitting the colossus right in the chest. Then, it detonated, drowning the world in pale blue light for a moment.

Sunny froze, his eyes opening wide.

'Crazy girl… she actually did it!'

When the flash of the explosion disappeared, he saw the towering figure of the prince sway slightly and take half a step back. Then, Sun Prince indifferently looked down, at a barely visible scratch left on the breastplate of his polished armor. He did not seem damaged by the devastating detonation of the enchanted bolt at all.

However, he did forget about Noctis… at least for now.

That had not come without a cost, though.

Cassie's desperate maneuver might have distracted the colossus, but it left her in a vulnerable position. Four of the pursuing enemy ships had managed to close distance and surrounded the graceful vessel, showering its deck with arrows. Several Sailor Dolls fell down, their wooden bodies damaged heavily or destroyed completely. The rest released their own arrows.

There were two mannequins standing beside the blind young woman, each holding a heavy shield. By now, both shields were riddled with arrows, and this time, their protection turned out to be lacking.

Two arrows slid past Cassie's defenders. She deflected one with the Quiet Dancer, but the second struck her in the shoulder, throwing the slender girl back…

At the same time, the four enemy ships shot the heavy ballistae standing on their bows, and four wicked bolts hit the hull of the graceful vessel. Two bounced off, but the other two must have possessed powerful enchantments — they lodged themselves deep into the ancient wood, but failed to deal any substantial damage.

However, dealing damage was not their real purpose.

Each bolt was connected to the ship that had shot it by a thick chain. Harpooned by them, Cassie's vessel was severely slowed down and pulled into two different directions, its hull groaning, as if on the verge of being ripped apart.

The two ships that failed to sink their harpoons into it were free to either close in to send a boarding party over, or simply ram it at high speed.

And not too far away, Sun Prince was already readying his javelin again…

However, Sunny did not see any of this.

After a few moments of disorientation, those warriors who had survived the blast of fire from the Patient Avenger had renewed their assault, thrown into a frenzy by the death of so many of their comrades. He was forced to fight without paying attention to anything else.

In this battle, each of the members of the cohort had a role to play. He was powerless to help Cassie, even if he wanted to. Sunny had to survive his own ordeal, and the blind girl had to survive hers…

That bitter feeling of powerlessness… he had not tasted it in a long, long time.

Deflecting a deadly blow of the enemy sword and killing the man wielding it with a lightning-fast slash of the Midnight Shard, Sunny let out a hoarse, resentful growl.

'Hate it… I hate this feeling…'

Far away, the Sailor Dolls somehow managed to sever one of the harpoon chains, a few of them silently falling into the crimson darkness in the process. Cassie broke the shaft of the arrow lodged in her shoulder, gritted her teeth, and took the oars again.

Now held by only one vessel, she did not try to escape by playing tug-of-war with it, and instead suddenly turned her ship in the direction of the enemy.

Not expecting this, the enemy captain did not react in time. As the result, the metal beak of the sorcerous ship's ram crashed into its side at full speed, piercing the hull and splitting the whole vessel in half.

A moment later, the Sailor Dolls shot the portside ballistae, several more bolts glancing ineffectively off the giant's impenetrable steel body without leaving even a scratch. It did get his attention, however… another javelin flew at the graceful ship, missing it just by a meter or two.

Cassie did not die.

And Sunny did not die, either.

He slaughtered the last of the ship's defenders and drew in a rugged breath, then braced himself when the deck suddenly shuddered under him.

'What…'

Looking up, he saw boarding hooks biting into the wooden railings, and planks being thrown from the deck of another ship to the one he was standing on.

Dozens of warriors in red armor were already jumping over, their eyes burning with bloodlust and a maniacal dream of glory.

He remained motionless for a split second, and then tiredly smiled.

'Oh… they came themselves. I see. How convenient… I won't have to waste essence on using Shadow Step…'

Gripping his weapons, Sunny threw a glance overboard.

Only nine gargoyles remained, but all members of the cohort seemed to be still alive, if a little worse for wear. The enemy fleet was missing two dozen ships, or even more…

Things were about to get really hard, however.

Now that they had the undivided attention of Sun Prince…

Now that their reserves of essence were starting to run dry…

The real trial was about to start.

Illuminated by the dim crimson radiance, Sunny bared his fangs and dashed toward the rushing enemies.

# Chapter-721: Dreadful Threat

Sunny cut through the crew of the boarding ship, leaving no one alive. His towering figure moved among the enemies with incredible speed and grace, as if performing a macabre dance of death.

His battle style was as shapeless and unpredictable as the devil himself, effortlessly switching from grounded defense to explosive offense, to monstrous ferocity that only a Nightmare Creature could possess. He fought with his four hands, with his fangs and horns, even with his armored tail.

As more and more enemies fell, cut down by the burning blades, a scorching haze of evaporating blood surrounded him like a crimson mantle.

Here and there, the two connected ships were already catching on fire, their sails burning in the dim red darkness of the night sky like funeral pyres for the warriors dying by his hand.

…And then, suddenly, there was no one left for him to kill.

Dismissing the Broken Oath, Sunny groaned and leaned heavily on the Cruel Sight. His breath was labored and rugged, and the Mantle of the Underworld was covered by countless scratches. Beneath the onyx armor, his body was bruised and battered, with several shallow wounds seeping with blood where the enemy blades or Aspect Abilities had found their way through the cracks.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'How many ships did I take out? Three… four? No… five…'

He looked around, trying to ascertain the situation.

The others had done well, too. Together with the gargoyles, the

cohort had managed to destroy…

His eyes widened.

…Almost half of the enemy fleet was gone. Dozens of ships were obliterated, thousands of brave warriors killed. A lion's share of that had been done by Cassie and the Sailor Dolls, as well as the gargoyles, but still…

Sunny drew in a hoarse breath.

'When… when did we become so scary?'

The thought of being the big dreadful threat, for once, was refreshing… and yet, his excitement was shortlived.

No matter how powerful the cohort had become and how well they had planned the battle, it was still not enough.

By now, the tide of it was already shifting, their temporary success waning with each second.

Sunny, Effie, and Kai had exhausted most of their essence. The Soul Serpent was mere moments away from losing its ability to assume the form of other shadows. Saint and Nightmare were faring better than the rest of them, but they, too, seemed to be slowing down, more and more injuries accumulating on the black body of the fearsome steed, its taciturn rider moving with visible strain.

Much worse than that, the sorcerer's ship was playing a deadly game of cat and mouse with Sun Prince. Guided by Cassie's hand, the vessel was still in one piece, but it was unclear how long she would be able to outrun death. Without her presence on the battlefield, the rate at which the enemy ships were being destroyed diminished drastically, and each had more freedom to move and attack.

And the gargoyles… were no more.

Most of them were destroyed by the steel colossus, some were overpowered and shattered by the Ascended warriors of the defending fleet. The few that remained were struggling, caught in enchanted chain nets and moments from being obliterated.

The blood moon still shone with crimson radiance, as though the eclipse had no intention of ever ending, and there was no sign of Noctis. There was no sign of Solvane, either, which meant that the sorcerer was still alive, at least.

The only indication that the two immortal Transcendents were out there, somewhere, locked in a vicious fight, were the loud rattling of the heavenly chains and sudden quakes that run through one island after another. The islands swayed as pieces of them crumbled into the Sky Below.

Hoping that Noctis would arrive and save them all like a god out of the machine was pointless. Hoping for anything was pointless… they were here to release Hope from her shackles, after all, and not the other way around.

The situation was about to turn really, really bad for the cohort, and there was no way Sunny could think of to change it.

'No… no problem. I'll just go and destroy five more ships… somehow. And then five more…'

Falling down, he dove into the shadows and stepped through them, wasting some of his last essence to appear on a different ship.

Sunny might have been tired, but the battle went on. The world did not care about his exhaustion.

It only cared about one thing…

Sunny had to fight, or die.

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On a different vessel, Effie stared at the broken remains of the runic spear in her hand for a short moment, then let out an infuriated shout and bashed the attacking enemy with what was left of its shaft, using it as a club to shatter his leg.

The Dusk Shard was growing heavy in her hand, and she had no essence left to spare to activate the [Indomitable] enchantment and change its weight. Because of that, Effie was a split second too slow,

and a sharp blade passed beneath the shield to slash her across the shoulder.

…This time, the blade did not bounce off the girl's skin, and instead sliced it apart. Drops of blood fell down to the slick deck.

High above, Kai barely dodged an enemy arrow and reached toward his quiver, only to find it empty. Gritting his teeth, he dashed to the side, caught another arrow out of the air, then instantly nocked his on the string of his bow and sent it flying back at the archer, hitting the man in the eye.

His essence was nearly gone, as well, and he had already lost too much blood to the Blood Arrow. Mundane ones were all he could use… and now, he had none left.

A few moments later, the man in a charred wooden mask crashed into the deck of the ship a few steps away from Effie and spun, summoning a sharp saber. He was prepared to cover the young girl's back to his last breath, if need be.

…And some distance away, Cassie finally failed to dodge one of the monstrous javelins completely. It streaked across the deck of the graceful ship, turning the massive siege engine on its bow into a cloud of splinters, tearing out a part of the hull, and obliterating a dozen Sailor Dolls along with it.

The young woman paled at the sounds of carnage, then hesitated for a few long moments.

Then, a resolute expression appeared on her beautiful face.

With a steady hand, she pushed one of the oars all the way down.

Following her command, the ancient vessel abandoned the border between the two skies and started climbing up.

Higher, higher, and then higher still.

As if trying to reach the crimson moon itself.

# Chapter-722: Soul Reaver

Landing on the deck of the enemy ship, Sunny swayed and caught himself, then stared somberly at the warriors of the Sun Legion, all of whom had already noticed his arrival.

Following the command of the captain, the swordsmen advanced in a loose, but orderly formation. Behind them, the archers drew their bows and aimed them at the towering devil, their eyes shining with faith and resolve.

…They did not get a chance to shoot, however.

A split second later, a ghastly abomination landed between them, its six front limbs and terrifying beak reaping half a dozen lives in an instant.

This was Sunny's signal to move.

He dashed toward the ranks of the advancing swordsman, and at the same time, the Soul Serpent attacked them from behind. The two cut through the defenders of the ship and met in the middle of its deck.

It was at that moment that the Shadow finally exhausted the last of its essence. The abominable form of the Spire Messenger suddenly lost its shape and crumbled into a tide of darkness, which then rushed toward Sunny.

A serpentine black odachi then appeared in his hands. Sunny dismissed his other weapons, leaving only the great blade to keep him company... and roared.

He was too low on essence to use any of their enchantments, anyway… but each kill of the odachi was going to return a portion of it into his cores. More than that, the Soul Serpent was not the only one who reunited with Sunny — the haughty shadow had returned,

as well, and had already wrapped itself around his body, alleviating some of his exhaustion and gifting him with its strength.

Now, all Sunny had to do was fight and kill. With each of the enemies that fell, he was going to replenish more of his dwindling shadow essence, and that essence would then be used to kill more enemies and destroy more ships.

As long as he continued to kill, he would not have to stop. Unless he was killed himself, of course…

[Soul Reaver] was, indeed, an insidious Ability.

In a split second before the avalanche of enemies descended on him, Sunny glanced into the crimson sky.

Out there, at a distance, the graceful ship was climbing high into the sky. Its hull was in shambles, with several sections of it shattered by the heavy bolts of the enemy ballistae. The powerful siege engine on its bow was gone, blown away by some terrible strike. There was a massive harpoon lodged in the vessel's side, with a piece of an enemy ship swinging below it on a thick chain.

Barely any Sailor Dolls remained on the deck, most of them broken or destroyed.

Seeing the pitiful state of the once-majestic ship, Sunny couldn't help but grit his teeth.

Then, he frowned.

'What the hell is she doing?'

Why was Cassie rising into the sky? Out there in the boundless vastness of the night, there was nothing to protect her from the ire of Sun Prince and the enemy ships. The winds were much stronger up there, and the air much thinner. It was very risky…

However, Sunny had no time to think about it. The blind girl must have known what she was doing… out of everyone he knew, he was confident in Cassie's foresight the most.

She always had a reason.

…Throwing these thoughts out of his mind, Sunny strangled his worry for her and clashed with the first few of the enemies.

He slashed down, splitting the opponent's helmet and skull with the sharp blade of the great odachi, then slammed its hilt into another man's face, shook the first corpse off the sword, and cut low, severing another enemy's leg.

Then, Sunny grabbed the disoriented man whose face he had just crushed with one of his free hands and, using his body as a shield, barreled through the enemies, slashing left and right. The Mantle of the Underworld rang, withstanding several powerful blows.

One of the strikes was especially dire. Something managed to cut through the onyx armor and bit deep into his flesh, making Sunny stumble and hiss. It was the captain of the vessel — the woman in bright armor stood among the slaughtered archers, her hands raised, two disks of sharp, blinding light forming on her palms.

Cursing, Sunny threw the body of the still struggling enemy at the attacking legionnaires… and then bent down, picking up a stray bolt meant for the ship's ballistae.

In the hand of the towering demon, the massive projectile almost looked like an oversized spear.

Sending some of the newly received essence into his muscles, Sunny grunted, and then tossed the bolt with all his might.

…The captain's eyes widened, but before she could even move, the improvised javelin struck her in the chest with the force of a siege ram, ending the woman's life immediately.

[You have slain an Ascended…]

Sunny had no time to celebrate, because he was once again being attacked from all sides.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

'She was an Ascended, huh…'

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He slaughtered the remaining crew of the ship, then rammed it into another vessel and slaughtered its defenders, as well. By then, the Mantle of the Underworld was full of cracks and gaps, and his battered body beneath was full of holes.

On the bright side, he had regained enough essence to freely activate the [Living Stone] enchantment of his armor, which allowed it to quickly recover from the damage and glisten darkly once again, its surface flawless and pristine.

Sunny could not say the same about himself.

Even though he had managed to recover some essence, his physical state was swiftly deteriorating. The countless shallow wounds were not too dangerous, especially because Blood Weave refused to allow his blood to flow out of them. A couple of the more serious injuries he had received were not too bothersome for now, as well.

However, his endurance was not limitless. Sunny was dead tired, and no amount of essence could fix that. He had only managed to last that long because of the Blood Blossom and the [Underworld Armament], but even that was not enough to sustain him anymore.

And the battle… the battle still raged on.

Cassie had climbed so high into the sky that he could not even see her damaged ship anymore, taking most of what remained of the enemy fleet with her. The light of their lanterns turned into small dots that moved high above, resembling falling stars. From time to time, a piece of broken wood would fall from the darkness, reminding him that a fierce clash was still taking place up above.

The pressure on the boarding parties reduced somewhat, but there were still a dozen ships left to stall them… or rather, hunt them down. Now that Sunny, his Shadows, and his friends were tired and riddled with wounds, the roles they played subtly changed. He was not sure who was attacking whom anymore.

But worst of all…

With the distraction of Cassie's ship gone, the steel colossus once again resumed his search for Noctis.

Sun Prince grabbed two of his gargantuan javelins, then bent slightly, and lunged forward. Gaining incredible speed, the giant leaped into the air, flew across a vast gap between two islands, and landed on the surface of a new one with a thunderous crash.

This island was just one chain away from the Ivory City, with several tall pillars rising into the air to serve as mooring masts for the flying ships. Much more importantly…

From it, the colossus had a clear shot at the last place where Noctis and Solvane had shown themselves, still locked in terrible combat.

Sun Prince gazed into the crimson darkness, and then slowly raised his hand…

# Chapter-723: Falling Star

'Crap…'

The ship Sunny had just cleared happened to be very near to the island where Sun Prince was standing… in fact, all of the remaining ships were close to it due to the fact that the battle had gradually shifted closer to the Ivory City.

He was not sure how much time it took and for how long he had been fighting. All he knew was how terribly tired he felt… and that they were on the verge of utter defeat.

Looking at the steel colossus that was just beyond reach, Sunny gritted his teeth.

The bastard was not allowed to throw that javelin… he had to be stopped at all costs.

Noctis had to be protected.

Not because Mordret told him so, but simply because the sorcerer was their best, and most likely only, chance to survive.

Sunny hesitated for a split second, and then summoned Nightmare and Saint back. The Shadows were entangled in a bloody battle on the deck of a distant ship. Following his command, the black steed did not waste a single moment to turn and leap into the dark sky.

Landing on another vessel, it flew past the startled and terrified soldiers, then jumped again. Just like that, the stallion soon reached Sunny and stopped, his sides rising heavily, covered in terrible wounds.

Bloody foam was falling from his mouth.

The courser's eyes, however, were still full of unbreakable will and murderous resolve. He was a proud and stubborn creature, after all... almost as stubborn as Sunny.

Sunny offered him a pale smile.

"You did well… rest now, for a bit."

Saint dismounted and stood motionlessly, looking at him with her usual calm composure. Her ruby eyes, however, seemed to have become a little dim. The taciturn knight's armor was cracked and battered, but she did not appear to be seriously injured. There was ruby dust streaming from the cracks, still...

Sunny summoned the shadows embracing Nightmare and Saint back and then wrapped all four of them around his body.

Below, the steel colossus had already taken aim and was prepared to make his throw…

Before he could, however, a heavy bolt suddenly struck him in the neck. The giant lingered for a moment, then slowly turned his head.

Standing at the bow of the ship, Sunny picked up another bolt and smiled grimly.

He did not know how to load and aim a ballista, but his own strength was more than enough, or perhaps even greater than that of a siege weapon. Sure, his first throw did not seem to do any damage… it had to have been rather annoying, though…

Augmented by the [Sonorous] enchantment, the Extraordinary Rock boomed, spreading his voice far and wide:

"Hey, you! Shadow sends his regards! Come and get me, rust bucket… how's that hand feeling, by the way?!"

Illuminated by the dim light of the crimson moon, the colossus shifted slightly. The shadows veiling his eyes grew deeper, and then, his javelin slowly moved, changing its aim.

Sunny laughed.

'I guess he remembers me!'

Which was good…

What was bad was that Sunny did not really know how to steer a flying ship, and so, he currently was a stationary target. A sitting duck, basically…

With a shrug, he dismissed his Shadows and tossed the second bolt at the giant, then looked in satisfaction as it bounced fruitlessly off the Chain Lord's stoic face.

'My aim did improve, huh?'

Just one more throw, and it would be time for him to abandon ship...

Sun Prince lowered his head, and then suddenly lashed out, moving with stunning speed for a creature of his size. It was as though he was trying to kill an irritating fly.

Sunny's smile froze.

He had not expected that fast of a reaction at all…

A split second before the javelin hit the ship, a hand grabbed him from behind, and Sunny felt himself moving. Then, something exploded below him, and everything was momentarily enveloped in a cloud of splinters.

Kai, who was holding him as he tried to fly up, grunted.

"H—heavy…"

In the next moment, they were hit by the shockwave, and the archer lost his hold of the four-armed demon. Together, they plummeted down. Effie was there, too, clinging to Kai's back and holding on for her dear life.

The two seemed riddled with wounds, but still alive.

Sunny felt the world spin for a couple of seconds, then shook off his disorientation, summoned the Dark Wing, and tried to slow down his

fall.

They landed on the surface of the island and instantly moved, dodging the debris of the destroyed ship. All three somehow managed to avoid being crushed…

Then, however, the ground beneath them suddenly shook.

Feeling a sickening emptiness in his chest, Sunny slowly turned his head and saw the towering mountain of steel walking toward them, the island quaking with each of the giant's steps.

The nightmarish memory of being smashed like a bug by Sun Prince's sole flashed in front of his eyes once again, making Sunny flinch and back away.

There was nowhere they could run, however.

And more importantly, they couldn't… they still needed to draw Sun Prince away from Noctis.

But what could they do but die, faced with the fury of an immortal Transcendent?

Sunny paled.

'Think, think!'

He raised his odachi with uncertainty, desperately trying to evaluate their chances. He still had some essence left… enough for a few minutes of remaining a shadow, or making a jump or two. Would that be enough? What of the others?

And what was he going to do when his essence ran out?!

Then, a sudden sound attracted his attention.

Looking up, Sunny saw something that made his eyes widen.

Far above, in the dark red sky…

A silhouette of a graceful ship appeared from the radiance of the

moon.

Battered and damaged, the ship was flying… no, almost falling… down. It had been descending from terrible heights, and so, gathered such staggering momentum that the winds screamed loudly as they were being cut by the bow of the plummeting vessel.

This was the sound Sunny had heard.

He could almost see a delicate silhouette standing at the stern, holding the oars in her hands.

'Cassie…'

Falling from the sky like a star, the battered ship changed its course slightly…

And then rammed into the giant steel colossus at full speed, causing the whole world to tremble.

# Chapter-724: Weight of Regret

The battered ship fell from the dim red darkness of the sky and, illuminated by the eerie radiance of the crimson moon, crashed into the towering steel colossus. The armored beak of the ship's ram struck the giant's chest with such tremendous force that there was a blinding flash of light, and then a powerful shockwave rolled across the island, violently throwing Sunny off his feet.

The deafening roar of the impact came as he fell.

Rolling on the ground, Sunny was assaulted by the thundering crash of the blast, the rumbling groan of shattering wood, and the booming shriek of heavy metal being ripped apart.

Stunned and disoriented, he rose to his knees, then swayed a little and looked up.

What he saw made him pale.

The sorcerer's ship lay broken on the ground. The fluid lines of its graceful hull were broken and gaped with terrible breaches, wide cracks running through the ancient wood. Its bow was completely shattered, and the damage in the front part of the vessel was especially severe. The beautiful tree growing around its main mast seemed damaged and... dead.

Cassie was nowhere in sight.

At the very edge of the island, thrown back, Sun Prince knelt. The steel colossus was swaying dangerously, clutching at his face with his one remaining hand. At the spot where the ram of the ship had struck, his chest was caved in and ripped open, rivers of molten metal flowing from the terrible wound.

And in the depths of the wound, turned incandescent by the heat, a

cage made in the form of a human figure was revealed.

…The cage was slightly broken, too, and a charred hand could be seen clawing at the edges. Under its fingers, the metal was bending like cloth, slowly being torn away.

Sunny shuddered, and then turned his gaze back to the wreck of the flying ship.

'Cassie… where's Cassie…'

He could not see the blind young woman anywhere in the wreckage.

However… Sunny saw someone else.

A bloodied figure suddenly fell from above, bounced off the ground, and crashed into the hull of the ship, causing more cracks to appear on its surface. Raven black hair, pale skin… it was Noctis.

The sorcerer did not look good.

His whole body was covered in blood, terrible wounds gaping open here and there. His beautiful face was broken and disfigured, the skin split open and white bone visible beneath, with one eye socket empty and full of darkness.

He was still alive, though… of course, he was.

Noctis could not escape from the pain into the merciful embrace of death even if he wanted to.

As Sunny watched, paralyzed for a moment, something flashed through the air, and a graceful figure appeared for a split second in front of the sorcerer, her beautiful chestnut hair dancing in the wind.

In the next moment, a large portion of the hull of the ship exploded as Noctis was pushed through it by a vicious strike. Both Saints disappeared into the darkness of the ancient vessel, which then shuddered, hinting that their dreadful battle continued.

Sunny froze, looking between the swaying colossus and the wreckage of the ancient ship. His mind was empty, and he did not know what

to do…

Or rather, he could not decide what took priority.

There was not much time to decide, however.

Gritting his teeth, he looked around, searching for his friends.

Kai seemed to be knocked out by the blast a little, but Effie was already on her feet, staring in the same direction as he.

There was a grim expression on her face.

Sunny groaned, then slowly stood up.

"Effie… any... any ideas?"

She hesitated for a moment, then flashed him a pale smile.

"I guess it's this time…"

He frowned.

"What time?"

The young girl glanced at the wreckage, and then said wistfully:

"You know, that time when, in the movies, someone says to split up!"

Sunny stared at her, not entirely understanding what she meant.

Effie's gaze slowly shifted to the kneeling colossus and, in a steady voice, she said:

"Give me the knife… the Ruby one. I'll deal with the big bastard. You and Kai go and find Cassie, then help the lunatic… in that order. He's not going to die any time soon, anyway..."

He stared at her from above, deep shadows veiling his eyes. Sunny had a lot to say… but in the end, he simply asked:

"Are you sure?"

The young girl laughed.

"Don't I look like I'm sure? Relax, doofus… it's just an immortal Transcendent. We better deal with that thing before it escapes the cage, anyway…"

Sunny gritted his teeth, then summoned the Covetous Coffer and handed Effie the knife that they had gotten from the creature in the lake.

There was no time to say anything else, and no need to. Effie took the knife, gripped his wrist for a moment, and then dashed away without looking back.

Sunny helped Kai stand up and, supporting the disoriented archer, hurried toward the wreckage of the crashed ship. As they ran, an ugly expression appeared on his bestial face.

'Don't you die on me, you freeloader… your sleeping pod is still in my house, dammit! Do you even how much hassle it is to properly dispose of a corpse… if you have any conscience, you will stay alive!'

…Behind him, Effie ran to the edge of the island, summoning the Dusk Shard. As the swirl of sparks surrounded her hand, she jumped up and landed on a toppled pillar that lay parallel to the ground, rising slightly at the far end.

The young girl rushed across the long pillar and then leaped high into the air with all her prodigious strength, flying straight toward the kneeling giant's chest.

As she flew, Effie activated the single enchantment of the heavy shield.

[Forged from a shard of a fallen star, this shield contains the weight of the heavens. Depending on the heart of its wielder, it can be light as a feather or heavy as regret.]

She poured her essence into the Memory, making it feel as heavy as a mountain on her hand.

A moment later, Effie crashed into the colossus with all that weight.

The impact was not nearly as devastating as when Cassie had brought her ship down from the sky.

But since Sun Prince was yet to regain his balance, it was just enough to push his upper body a little bit back.

...And that little bit was enough to send Sun Prince toppling over.

A few seconds later, both of them — the giant immortal and the little girl — disappeared from view, falling over the edge of the island.

Down into the empty darkness of the Sky Below.

# Chapter-725: Shipwreck Island

As Sunny and Kai moved toward the wreck of the ancient ship, the heavenly chains suddenly rattled deafeningly, and the whole island quaked once more as it shifted higher. Turning back, they saw that the steel colossus was gone from the edge. Effie was nowhere in sight, as well.

Sunny stared at the empty space where the giant had been kneeling not too long ago, then gritted his teeth and looked away.

Effie knew what she was doing… no one was more motivated to survive the Nightmare and return to the waking world alive. Not even Sunny. She would not have done anything that would leave her no chance to escape.

In any case, every one of them was in terrible danger. If Solvane managed to defeat Noctis, she would be coming for them next. And Cassie could have been dying or dead already, somewhere in the wreckage.

There was no time to waste on unnecessary thoughts.

Sunny dragged Kai forward, lamenting the fact that the archer was coming back to his senses so slowly. His incredible sight would have been very useful right about now…

His four shadows flew toward the wreck, gliding between the debris in search of the young woman. However, it was hard to make out anything in the chaotic mess of splintered wood, upturned soil, and shredded sails.

And then, finally, he thought that he noticed weak movement under a pile of debris.

With his two hearts beating wildly, Sunny rushed forward, then

threw a piece of the ship's hull aside and bent down, digging through the soil. Soon, he saw a piece of black fabric, and then removed some more dirt to reveal Cassie's pale face.

She struggled to sit, and then coughed violently.

The blind young woman seemed to be… fine. The piece of cloth covering her eyes had slid down, revealing two empty eye sockets, and her dress was soaked with blood from the arrow wound on her shoulder, but other than that, there were only mild scratches and lacerations on her body.

Miraculously, Cassie was alive.

Sunny stared at her with wide eyes, a sense of profound relief slowly spreading through his chest. The young woman coughed some more, wiped the dirt off her face, then turned her head slightly with an uncertain and vulnerable expression.

"Who... who is there? Sunny?"

He helped Kai sit down, then said:

"Yes, it's me. But can't your Ability tell?"

Cassie grimaced.

"I've run out of soul essence. Damnation…"

A stifled laugh escaped from his mouth.

"That's what you are concerned with? You damned fool… what the hell was that stunt?! How did you even survive the crash?!"

Cassie turned to him with a confused expression on her beautiful face.

"How did I… what? I jumped off the ship a few moments before it hit the Prince, of course. Dancer carried me down… I am not crazy…"

He stared at her for a moment, then covered his face with a hand and let out a long, relieved sigh.

"You've been spending too much time with me… only a madman would call ramming a flying ship into an immortal steel giant at full speed not crazy!"

Now that he knew that the blind girl was alive, though, he could finally think about everything else. As cold shivers ran down his spine, Sunny turned and stared at the dark gaping hole in the hull of the crashed ship where Noctis and Solvane had disappeared.

The wreckage was still trembling and groaning, proving that the two Transcendents were still fighting inside.

Cassie tried to stand up, fell back, then remained motionless for a few moments.

"What is happening?"

Sunny grimaced.

"Effie is dealing with what is left of Sun Prince. Kai is here, but he had the wind knocked out of him. Noctis… is also on the island. He seems to be losing to Solvane terribly."

His shadows returned, wrapping themselves around his body and bringing with them vast and fearsome strength.

Sunny lingered for a moment, and then stood up.

"You stay here with Kai and rest for a bit. I… I'll be back shortly."

The blind young woman frowned, then hurriedly fumbled for her blindfold and pulled it up, covering the empty darkness of her missing eyes.

"W—where are you going?"

He looked at the wreckage for a few moments, and then smiled darkly.

"Ah… I am just going to return a debt."

He owed Solvane quite a lot, after all.

Months of agony and desperation, the life of a dear friend… and even a heart.

When would he get a chance to repay her hospitality again?

Leaving Cassie and Kai behind, Sunny gathered his courage, and dashed toward the wreck.

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Jumping through the breach in the hull, he landed on the skewed floor of one of the compartments at the stern of the ship and froze for a moment, hit by a strong sense of deja vu.

All of this… did it not feel very familiar?

Was it not the same compartment he had entered the wreck through all that time ago, in the distant future, while hunting for miraculous coins?

Of course, back then, the ancient ship had looked vastly different, at least on the inside. It had been infested by a sprawling mass of brown vines and moss, the murky air full of poison they secreted.

Back then, Sunny had not known who Noctis was, and how his ship had ended up broken and abandoned on a desolate island near the rift.

Well… now everything fell in its place.

This island was going to become the Shipwreck Island. The wound in the chest of the giant steel corpse, the terrible damage done to the bow of the crashed vessel, it all made sense now… except for one thing.

How would Solvane end up trapped for thousands of years in the cargo hold, so that Sunny could kill her in the future?

Sunny did not consider his chances in a battle against the living embodiment of War to be very high, but the mere fact of knowing the future told him that it was not impossible to defeat her.

At least that was what he wanted to believe, sneaking through the broken ship as he came closer and closer to the sounds of the furious battle.

If he was wrong, however…

The possibility of Sunny himself becoming the host of a monstrous Corrupted parasite was not out of the question.

# Chapter-726: Sweet Release

As Sunny slowly approached the main cargo hold, he felt doubt crawl into his mind.

What was he actually doing?

A battle between two Saints was no place for an Awakened, no matter how powerful he had grown after absorbing thousands of shadow fragments and forming the fourth core. The gap in power between Sunny and Solvane was just too vast… he had faced her twice in the past, and each time, the War Maiden crushed him without even putting any effort into her attacks.

The bitter taste of those defeats still lingered in his mouth.

…Especially of the second one, when he watched helplessly as she slaughtered Elyas in front of his eyes.

When he remembered that vile day, his pupils narrowed. An overwhelming feeling of hatred and anger drowned his mind, so scorching and consuming that Sunny was momentarily stunned by the intensity of it.

Every wound, every second of torturous pain, every night of quiet desperation he had experienced in the Red Colosseum rose from the depths of his memory, making him feel as if he was reliving all that torment. The memory of the burning Sacred Grove was there, too, as well as that of an old man crying as he cradled the dead body of his mother in his trembling arms.

And that of Elyas's bright eyes suddenly turning empty and hollow. The grief, shame, and fury of not having been able to keep his promise and save the young man…

Sunny tried to resist the hatred, but failed. It was just too vast,

deep… and deserved.

Solvane had deserved his hatred.

She put him in a cage…

She tried to make him a slave.

Gritting his teeth and suppressing a bestial growl, Sunny continued to move forward.

'I'll make her pay... it is not impossible.'

His task was not as hard as he had made it to be. He did not need to defeat Solvane… he just needed to give Noctis an opportunity to defeat her. Anyone could be defeated, anyone could be destroyed... you just had to use the right weapon.

Even the gods had not been able to save themselves.

Sunny's enemy was an immortal Transcendent… but his weapon was an immortal Transcendent, too.

Approaching a familiar door, he summoned the Cruel Sight, inhaled deeply… and then turned into an incorporeal shadow, sliding noiselessly into the main cargo hold of the broken ship.

There, two Saints were entangled in a vicious battle.

***

Both Noctis and Solvane seemed to have forgone the use of weapons. Neither had they assumed their Transformed forms, preferring to remain in the shape of humans.

They were not even using their Aspect Abilities, unless Sunny simply failed to comprehend the scope and magnitude of what the Transcendents were doing.

Instead, the immortals chose the most direct, intimate, and brutal form of combat — they were fighting with their bare hands.

…Each strike was devastating enough to crush a mountain, sending destructive shockwaves through the vast cargo hold.

And Noctis seemed to be losing terribly.

Up close, the sorcerer looked even worse than when Sunny had caught a glimpse of him outside of the ship. He was covered in blood from head to toe, his face broken and missing an eye. One of his cheeks was ripped open, revealing white teeth and making it seem as though Noctis was grinning. The sight of it was both ghastly and disturbing.

Noctis looked more like a corpse than a living being.

And yet, he was still moving.

The speed at which the two Saints fought was almost too great for Sunny to discern anything, but he could still perceive the sorcerer deflecting some of Solvane's vicious blows and trying to dodge others.

Sometimes, he even succeeded.

…But mostly, he failed.

With each strike that landed on his body, more blood was spilled, more bones were broken with a sickening crunch, and more of what made Noctis himself was destroyed. There was almost nothing left of the beautiful and charming person Sunny had once seen on the surface of a golden coin.

Solvane, on the other hand, seemed perfectly fine.

Her tantalizing face was calm and slightly sad, her soft skin free of any blemishes, her simple red tunic flawlessly clean. The only indication that she had been locked in a furious fight with another Transcended was that her hands were covered in scarlet blood, becoming the same color as her garment.

His thoughts darkened.

'Damnation…'

Sunny hid in the shadows, watching tensely and waiting for his chance to interfere. There had to be a chance, a single instance where a momentary delay in Solvane's onslaught would allow Noctis to turn the tables on the War Maiden…

But no matter how long he waited and how closely he watched, the moment never came.

Instead, after another blow, Noctis let out a terrible scream and fell to his knees, blood streaming from his mouth.

Solvane calmly stepped forward and grabbed him by the hair, jerking the sorcerer's head up so that his mangled face could be seen.

With a solemn expression, she raised her bloodied fist to deliver the final blow and said in a voice that seemed to be more mournful than triumphant:

"Is this all? I… I expected more from you, Noctis… I wished for so much more…"

As Sunny cursed and prepared to attack the War Maiden from behind, the sorcerer struggled weakly in her grip. His gaze danced wildly across the cargo hold, as if searching for something to save him.

And then, for a short moment, it landed directly at Sunny, making him freeze.

Did… did he imagine it?

It seemed as though Noctis looked at him with purpose. It was just a split second, but Sunny was ready to swear that he noticed a silent message in the sorcerer's one remaining eye…

Don't.

…And then he saw something moving beneath the immortal's skin.

Sunny only hesitated for a heartbeat, but by then, it was already too late to do anything. Solvane struck, breaking Noctis's ribcage and thrusting her hand into his chest.

But then...

The War Maiden suddenly flinched and jumped back, letting out a quiet yelp. Her bloodied hand was pressed tightly against her body.

Noctis, meanwhile, continued to kneel, staring expressionlessly at his broken chest.

…Then, he shifted slightly and let out a long, deep sigh of relief.

"Ah… this is so much better… so much easier..."

He looked up, his ghastly grin slowly turning into a sincere one.

"...This was almost worth ruining my attire!"

# Chapter-727: Unforgiven

Suddenly, Noctis seemed… different.

He was still beaten, mangled, and covered in blood, but the sorcerer's presence subtly changed. If before it was faint and weakening, now, it became brimming with power, potency, and free-flowing energy.

Vast, furious… unrestrained.

And suffused with madness.

Despite the fact that Noctis was on his knees and crippled, he suddenly seemed terrifying. The morbid grin on his torn and disfigured face seemed more menacing than pitiful now. His one remaining eye glistened, reflecting the distant light of the crimson moon.

It was as though something that had been suppressing the sorcerer's true power all this time finally set him free.

Noctis inhaled deeply, and at the same, Solvane suddenly swayed. The hand she had used to crush his ribcage was still pressed against her body, blood streaming down on the red tunic.

Her beautiful eyes widened.

And then…

Something moved under her skin, making the War Maiden let out a pained scream.

She staggered back and looked at the kneeling sorcerer with a pale face.

"What… what have you done to me?"

Noctis smiled. His voice sounded hoarse and full of unfathomable emotion when he spoke:

"What else? I have fulfilled your most ardent wish, Solvane. I… have defeated you."

She stared at him in shock, then suddenly shuddered and let out another tortured scream. As drops of blood flew out of her mouth, the beautiful Transcendent stumbled and fell to her knees. Her sublime face was deathly pale and contorted by a grimace of terrible pain.

The sorcerer let out a croaking laugh and slowly stood up. Just like that, their roles were reversed. The War Maiden was on her knees, and Noctis was looming above her.

He lingered for a moment, and then looked at the patch of shadows where Sunny was hiding, his mind full of vague suspicion.

"You can come out, Sunless. It's safe now."

'What the hell...'

Sunny hesitated for a few seconds, then assumed his corporeal form and glanced at Solvane, his eyes burning with hatred.

Slowly, a few things were clicking in place and starting to make sense. The magical circle in the sorcerer's residence, the river of blood that Noctis had fed to the soil below, the cracks on the stone floor, the tremors that had been running through it from time to time…

Even the faint scream that had awoken Sunny on his last night in the Sanctuary.

He turned and stared at the sorcerer, a harrowing guess appearing in his mind.

Solvane, however, was still in the dark. As the ghastly movement under her skin grew stronger and more noticeable, she groaned:

"What… is… this… thing? My… my Aspect…"

Noctis smiled.

"Ah, you've noticed? Yes, there is no point in trying to summon your Abilities. My little pet is a bit hungry for soul essence, you see. I've been starving it for a few hundred years, after all."

As he spoke, his own essence flowed freely, coursing through his mangled body. The terrible wounds covering it started to heal at an incredible pace. As Sunny watched, the bloody hole in the sorcerer's chest closed, his shattered ribs coalescing back into proper shape. His torn cheek was already growing back together.

A clot of blood formed in his empty eye socket, slowly turning into a new eye.

Noctis took a step forward, leaned forward, and looked at Solvane. Then, he whispered:

"This pet of mine is a very special creature… it is a vine that feeds on powerful souls. The profane seed that eventually birthed it was created when the ashes of the Heart Grove mixed with Aidre's blood. You remember Aidre, don't you Solvane? Well… allow me to return her last gift to you!"

His voice seethed with boundless rage and sorrow.

Sunny frowned, then glanced at the sorcerer with a complicated expression.

So… Noctis had created Wormvine, a Corrupted Monster capable of devouring Saints, from the ashes of the Sacred Grove and Aidre's blood. He had kept it in the ground beneath his residence for hundreds of years, nurturing the abomination by feeding it his essence and blood.

And then, when the time came, he took it into himself, making his body both the bait and the trap for the person who had desecrated the Grove and killed its Lady. All this time, the sorcerer was restrained by having to suppress the creature and prevent it from devouring him from the inside. And when the monster finally found a new host... he was finally free to exert his full power.

A pale smile appeared on Sunny's face.

What a devious, patient… and ruthless vengeance Noctis had envisioned for Solvane!

He could learn a thing or two from the unforgiving sorcerer.

…The War Maiden looked at Noctis for a few moments, then bent in a violent convulsion, letting out a terrible shriek. The skin on her face broke, and a thin, worm-like vine appeared from beneath it, crawling forward through the blood. Another, thicker one, burst from her hand.

Solvane groaned, then let out a stifled chuckle.

"Ah… after all this time… I am defeated… by you?"

She gritted her teeth, and then suddenly smiled through the pain.

"Glory… to… the Beast!"

With that, the War Maiden struggled to move, and arduously reached forward with a trembling hand.

A knife carved out of a single piece of wood rested on her bloodied palm.

Noctis looked at her for a while, then silently took the knife and straightened, towering above the trembling, suffering woman. He remained motionless for a few moments, darkness veiling his face.

Sunny took a step forward, being strangled by hatred.

'No… no, not yet!'

Let her scream! Let her suffer more!

Let her suffer forever!

Killing Solvane was what they had planned… but now, looking at the beautiful, hateful priestess of War, he was unwilling to let her escape that easily! She had wanted this to happen all along! This was her

true victory!

Sunny's ability to think clearly dissolved, consumed by fury. He had just enough sense left to realize that this behavior was unnatural, that the intensity of his desire for revenge was unusual, even for someone as spiteful as him… but he did not care.

At that moment, the only thing he wanted was to see Solvane pay for what she had taken from him.

Noctis looked at the knife, his eyes full of darkness.

…And then threw it aside, lodging the wooden blade into the wall of the cargo hold.

When he spoke, his voice was trembling.

"You don't deserve to die. For what you did to us… you don't deserve to die, Solvane. You only deserve to live..."

# Chapter-728: Spiteful Shadow

Hearing the cruel words that sentenced Solvane to thousands of years of harrowing torment, Sunny couldn't help but feel a dark, euphoric sense of glee.

The memory of pain she had visited upon him and the faces of those she had killed flashed in front of his eyes once again, making that glee grow even sweeter.

'Good… good…'

The only thing Sunny regretted was that he had killed Solvane in the distant future, releasing her from that torment. If he had known better back then, he would have left her to rot.

Noctis coldly stared at the squirming priestess for a moment, and then turned around, as if intending to leave.

Solvane let out a groan of agony, more vines breaking through her skin and crawling down to the floor.

"W—wait!"

She struggled to raise her head and look up, her eyes full of fear.

"Noctis… you have to… kill me. You won't be able to… free her… if I am alive!"

The sorcerer stopped, lingered for a moment, and then glanced at her over the shoulder. His face was cold and unmoving.

After a long pause, he said nonchalantly:

"...Hope is a great, powerful daemon. She can handle a shackle or two on her own."

As Solvane's eyes widened, Noctis looked away and took a step toward the gates of the hold.

And Sunny, meanwhile…

Was doing the hardest thing he had ever done in his life.

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Sunny was walking toward the edge of the cargo hold, where the wooden knife was lodged into the wall.

Every step he made felt as if he was dragging a mountain with him.

No, it was much harder than that…

A mountain would have been heavy, but dragging it along was a simple task. Hard, or maybe even impossible, but simple nevertheless. However, he was not struggling against physical weight.

Instead, Sunny was struggling against his very nature.

He had grown up in the outskirts, fighting for his life in a cruel, indifferent world. He had to learn a lot of vicious lessons to survive. Those lessons made him selfish, cynical, and jaded, unwilling to trust anyone or believe in anything.

Those qualities had helped him to remain alive, but as his life changed, some of them turned into a hindrance. Slowly and painfully, he had shed his previous skin and learned new things. He learned to trust those who deserved to be trusted, and have hope in himself and the future.

However, one thing he never managed to leave behind — and did not really want to — was his spite. Spite had been the only thing that motivated him to survive the First Nightmare, after all. Back then, and maybe even now, it was his only reason to live.

And so, Sunny was not big on forgiveness. He could not even forgive Cassie, at least not fully, despite everything that they had been through together before and after her decision to put Neph's life before his own.

He believed in the value of retribution. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth… that was the ancient law. No one should be able to trample on him and remain unpunished.

That was why the very thought of letting Solvane die in peace seemed abhorrent to him.

And yet…

His trembling hand landed on the handle of the wooden knife.

Sunny was a very stubborn person.

Gritting his teeth, he dislodged the knife from the wall and swayed a little, struggling to keep the all-consuming hatred that drowned his mind at bay.

Yes, he wanted Solvane to pay, he wanted her to suffer.

But… even more than that, he wanted fate to go to hell. He could not allow for another thing to happen just like it had happened in the real past. He needed to prove, once and for all, that he was not a marionette that hung powerlessly from the strings of fate, able only to dance to a predetermined tune.

He was also really outraged at the thought of Hope messing with his mind.

And this was where the scorching intensity of his hatred for the War Maiden had come from, without a doubt — from the poisonous influence of the Demon of Desire, who had taken his trauma, sorrow, and anger, and turned it into a weapon to subjugate him.

It was a weird thing, to know that his fury was fabricated, but at the same time welcome it and be tempted to surrender to it.

And that temptation… ah, it was way harder to overcome than the weight of a mountain.

'Why am I even doing this? She deserves to suffer… wouldn't it be splendid to leave her to suffer… wouldn't it be the most joyous thing ever? Oh, it would… I can't imagine anything sweeter…'

Sunny struggled to even remember why he was holding the knife.

'Oh, right… fate… I did promise to destroy it, didn't I? That was because… because my fate is to be a slave. I don't really want to be a slave… but who cares? I want Solvane to be tortured for eternity much more than I want to be free… freedom is distant, and abstract. Who even wants it? But retribution, it's right here… and feels so wonderful…'

Gritting his teeth, he made a step forward.

Step. Step. Another step.

Walking across the cargo hold of the broken ship was much harder than it had been to climb a cold, dark mountain in chains.

He wasn't sure that he was going to make it.

His face was contorted by an ugly grimace, and his dark eyes burned with mad glee.

Then, Sunny stopped.

'I… I change my mind. It is worth it! Surrendering to fate is worth it, if it means that this hateful witch will be tortured endlessly. This will be right… this will be just… this will be the best outcome of all…'

Sunny sighed, and smiled with relief.

Now that he decided to surrender to fate, it was as though a terrible weight was lifted from his shoulders. He was free to bask in the joy of revenge, revel in it. He was unburdened, ecstatic, and at peace.

Sunny smiled…

…And thrust the wooden knife into Solvane's chest.

'Damnation…'

Yes, leaving the War Maiden to suffer felt right and just.

But Sunny had never been righteous, and did not really care about

being just. And more importantly than that, he wanted to spite fate much more than he wanted to avenge himself on Solvane.

...The beautiful priestess shuddered and looked at him with, pain and relief mixing in her mesmerizing eyes.

Then, her gaze slowly turned empty, losing the spark of life, and her body fell to the floor.

Sunny grimaced, feeling bitterly disappointed. He was not happy with his choice at all. He felt terrible.

But it had to be done.

As the wooden knife broke in his hand, the Spell whispered:

[You have slain a Transcendent human, Solvane.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[...You have received a Memory.]

He blinked.

'Huh… another Memory? How does it even work?'

And then, Sunny suddenly felt really uncomfortable. As if someone was staring at his back.

He turned around slowly and met the sorcerer's dark gaze.

Noctis looked at him, and then bared his teeth in a dangerous smile.

"Sunless… what did you do?"

Sunny shivered, suddenly feeling very cold.

'Crap…'

# Chapter-729: Broken Shackles

Noctis stood in the darkness of the cargo hold, looking at Sunny with a dangerous, cold smile. One of his eyes glinted with pale moonlight, the other, still suffused with blood, with a mad red glow.

The air around them became cold, the darkness grew deeper.

Sunny trembled a little, then glanced at the broken wooden knife in his hand. Now that the tool created by the Lord of Light had served its purpose, it was empty and mundane, the ocean of radiant energy and the string of fate long gone from within it.

He dropped the remains of the knife on the floor, glanced at the sorcerer with a dour expression, and said nonchalantly:

"I killed her. Why?"

Noctis stared at him for a few moments, then took a deep breath.

"...I've been planning and waiting for this moment for a very long time, you know. Hundreds of years, really. And you… you just went and ruined it all. Ah, Sunless, we are friends, but I'll be honest… I am a little bit cross right now…"

Something shifted in the darkness, and the walls of the cargo hold groaned. The sorcerer continued to stare at him, his red eye glowing brighter and brighter. Sunny himself winced, feeling the sorcerer's presence crash into him like a wave.

Then, he pretended to look unimpressed, took a step forward, and shrugged.

"Well, get over yourself."

Noctis blinked.

Then, he tilted his head a little.

Then, he stopped smiling.

"Get… over myself?"

It did not seem like he liked that answer at all.

Sunny nodded.

"Yeah. Snap out of it and get over yourself."

He pointed at the body of Solvane and frowned.

"First of all, do me a favor and remember why we started all this mess in the first place. It was to kill the Chain Lords and free Hope. Oh, look! A dead Chain Lord. Isn't it wonderful?"

He smiled, revealing his sharp fangs. However, Noctis remained unmoved, still staring at him with a frightening coldness.

Sunny took another step forward and pointed a finger at his chest.

"Second of all… aren't you too full of yourself? Aidre's last gift, really?"

He judged that if there was a moment when the Transcendent would simply kill him with one strike, it would have been now. So, despite the smile, Sunny was actually trembling inside.

Nocts gritted his teeth.

"What's wrong with that?"

Sunny crossed his arms.

"Who are you to deliver gifts on her behalf? Unlike the two of us, Lady Aidre had no hatred for Solvane. In fact, she was grateful to her. She swore to carry that debt of gratitude to the Shadow Realm, even… I saw it all in one of the nightmares you had sent me into."

The corner of the sorcerer's mouth twitched.

"You are lying. Why would she?"

Sunny shook his head.

"I never lie. Lady Aidre was the first of the eternal shackles to question your duty, wasn't she? She came to the conclusion that Hope should be liberated, and that was where you got that idea. From her."

He sighed.

"Well, who has done more to make it happen than Solvane? Without her, Hope's prison would still have been perfect. The Chain Lords wouldn't have been driven to desperation and madness. And we wouldn't be standing here, trying to break the chains that bind Desire."

Sunny grimaced and looked away, still in the throes of crushing regret about gifting Solvane an easy death.

"So, as much as it pains me to admit… in a sense, Solvane is the true architect of this rebellion. She made Lady Aidre's desire come true. And although I would have loved to let her suffer for an eternity… our task comes first."

Noctis remained motionless for a while, staring into the distance.

The mad light in his eyes seemed to subside a little.

Then, he shifted slightly and glanced at Sunny.

His voice sounded grim:

"...I suggest you run, Sunless."

Sunny froze.

'Crap! It didn't work!'

He took a step back and shuddered, staring at the sorcerer with fear:

"Uh… Noctis, wait! What I meant to say was…"

The sorcerer shook his head.

"No, you idiot! I'm not going to kill you! But have you stopped to think what would happen if Solvane dies?"

Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"I, uh... was a bit preoccupied. Wait, what?"

Noctis glanced at the body of the War Maiden and backed away, too.

"The Wormvine… it doesn't have a host anymore, you foolish shadow! So, run!"

***

Some distance away, at the edge of the island, a small hand appeared from the darkness. A young girl in battered armor struggled to grab something, then pulled herself up, fell on the grass, and remained motionless, staring at the dark sky.

Her small body was covered in burns and lacerations, the bronze armor shredded so thoroughly that it was falling apart, slowly turning into dimming sparks of light. She was severely wounded, drained of essence, and exhausted.

But she was alive.

Effie stared at the stars, too tired to move. Feeling pain course through her badly burnt body, she winced slightly, and then whispered quietly:

"Oh... you should have seen the other guy..."

A pale smile appeared on her bloodied face.

…Far below, a giant steel carcass was swaying in the wind, its leg tangled in a heavenly chain that the colossus had broken as he fell. His chest was split open, and deep within it, a half-open cage in the form of a human figure was slowly turning cold.

Sun Prince was dead, as well.

Now, only two Chain Lords remained.

***

Sunny and Noctis left the cargo hold of the ancient ship in a hurry, barely escaping the Wormvine. Behind them, the brown vines were already crawling across the floor, growing in size with each second, hungry to find a source of soul essence to devour.

Noctis did not seem too enthusiastic about the prospect of fighting his own creation, and neither was Sunny. The last time, he had destroyed the Corrupted Monster by killing its host… but this time, he himself ran the risk of becoming the host!

It was better to retreat and choose their battle wisely.

Very soon, they climbed on the hull of the broken vessel and lingered there for a few moments, looking up.

Above them, the remaining ships of the defending fleet hovered in the air, for some reason reluctant to approach and continue their relentless onslaught. There were still around forty ships left, but, perhaps stunned by the death of their commanders or afraid of the sorcerer, the enemies remained in place.

Then, as if following an order, the ships turned and flew back, toward the Ivory City.

Sunny frowned.

"They are… retreating?"

He glanced at Noctis, unsure of what was happening.

The sorcerer stared at the sky for a few more moments, and then sighed.

"Well… I have good news and bad news."

Sunny did not like the sound of it at all.

"What is it?"

Noctis smiled.

"The good news is that the eclipse is ending."

And indeed, as soon as he said it, the crimson hue of the night sky changed. Looking up, Sunny saw that the shadow was leaving the surface of the moon, which was returning to its usual silver color.

It's position, though…

Suddenly, he felt a very, very bad premonition.

"...What's the bad news?"

Noctis silently pointed east.

Turning around, Sunny saw a line of pale lilac painting the sky above the horizon as the edge of the sun slowly appeared from the darkness of the Sky Below.

The sorcerer grinned.

"The night is over. It's a new day…"

# Chapter-730: Dying Wish

Sunny watched the sun appear over the eastern horizon, his hearts growing cold. His vertical pupils narrowed, and his fists clenched.

The night… was over? Had it been that long, already?

He had lost the track of time during the vicious battle in the skies, but it seemed as though their desperate assault on the flying fleet had only taken a second.

But in reality, of course, it had not.

He slowly turned to Noctis, whose battered face had almost healed and was now calm and carefree again. The sorcerer was looking at the sky with a strangely neutral expression.

"Remind me… wasn't the plan to defeat Sevirax before dawn, when he was devoid of his vast and terrifying powers?"

The immortal sighed.

"Well, it's good to have a plan. However, plans rarely go as you want them to go."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"So… what happens now? How are you going to deal with the dragon?"

Noctis shrugged.

"He must be really, really angry right now. After all, we just killed his brother — the only person Sevras still cares about in this world. Congratulations, by the way! I really did not expect you…"

Sunny interrupted him with a low growl.

"Get to the point! Now that the sun is rising, your powers will be diminished, while his will reach their peak. How are we going to survive?!"

The sorcerer remained silent for a few moments, then scratched the back of his head.

"I, uh… will come up with something?"

Sunny stared at him in disbelief.

"You are joking, right? Come on… you must have some devious trick up your sleeve! You have an incredible advantage, after all! You have the knife that can make him mortal, while he doesn't have yours. Should I give you the knives? You have never asked me for the damned knives!

Wasn't that the reason you befriended me, in the first place?!"

Noctis looked at him for a while, then simply shook his head.

"No. No, that was not the reason, Sunless. In any case, giving me the knife won't do much good. I will still have to defeat Sevras, whether he becomes mortal or not. Either I subdue him and we can use the knife to finish the job, or he subdues me, and then there's no point. And...

I really don't have any tricks left."

He smiled, and then added wistfully:

"Ah, except one."

Sunny exhaled with relief.

"Finally! What is it?"

The sorcerer turned to him with a smile.

"Why… it's you, Sunless! Of course. Did I not say that fate brought us together for a reason?"

Sunny stared at him, his expression slowly turning dark.

"You did… but what the hell do you mean?"

Noctis looked away, at the beautiful silhouette of the flying city. After a few moments, he said:

"No matter how my battle with Sevras goes, it will end near the Ivory Tower. One of us will fall… maybe it will be him, and maybe it will be me. However, that doesn't matter."

He sighed, and then glanced at Sunny.

"As long as one of us dies, there will be only one chain left. It won't hold Hope for long. So, Sunless, my dear friend…"

Noctis lingered for a moment, and then smiled.

"Should I lose... I want you to kill me. That is my desire."

The sorcerer looked at him, the smile disappearing from his face. Then, he said softly:

"That is the fate I spoke about. You are my death, Sunless. Didn't you know?"

Then, Noctis suddenly cleared his throat and awkwardly looked away.

"That is if I lose, of course! Don't, uh… don't kill me by mistake if I win. That would be very inconvenient… a bit funny, though…"

Sunny glared at him for a while, then faced the Ivory City and scoffed.

"I know… you'd better win, then!"

***

As the moon disappeared and the sky slowly grew brighter, Noctis and the members of the cohort gathered together and silently watched the sun rise.

The five of them had just accomplished something truly impossible — they had battled an army and two immortal Trancendents under the dim light of the crimson moon, and won.

The army had retreated, the immortals were dead. And the five of them, somehow, were still alive.

And yet, none of them felt relieved or triumphant.

The incandescent disc of the sun was rising like the blade of a guillotine, ready to cut down their lives.

The sorcerer was sitting on the grass with his eyes closed, gathering his strength for the approaching fight with the Ivory Dragon and trying to recover from his wounds as much as he could.

Effie lay on the ground, too battered and tired to move. Cassie was tending to her wounds.

Kai was grimly counting the arrows he had managed to gather. His charred mask was gone, revealing his burned, disfigured face.

Sunny was standing a small distance away, looking at a small statuette that lay in the palm of his hand, connected to a thin chain.

The statuette was cast of iron and depicted a beautiful young woman wielding a spear in one hand and gripping a human heart in the other, her nakedness covered only by a beast hide tied around her thighs, her face lost in the shadows.

It was very similar to the statue of War God he had seen on his first day in the Nightmare, but different in one detail — there was blood flowing from the wound in the statuette's chest, as though the heart she was holding had once belonged to the young woman herself.

Her figure felt strangely familiar.

This was the Memory he had received for killing Solvane the second time.

The runes read:

Memory: [Dying Wish].

Memory Rank: Transcendent.

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Charm.

Memory Description: [A young woman once wished to be free, but could only find her freedom in death. She called upon it, and touched by her sincerity, death came. But instead of embracing it herself, the young woman delivered death to those who held her in chains.]

Memory Enchantments: [Death Wish].

Enchantment Description: [Those who witness the wielder of this Memory are compelled; friends to be inspired, foes to seek the wielder out. The power of the Memory grows the more enemies they give the gift of death, and can be consumed to heal the wielder's wounds.]

Death Charge: [0/1000].

Sunny hesitated for a bit, and then dismissed the charm with a sigh.

This new powerful Memory of his could be extremely useful, without a doubt, especially its ability to bring him back from the brink of death. However, he suspected that he would have to kill a thousand enemies to make that healing really worthwhile.

It was still a powerful ability to have, but not in the current situation. He would have to build the charm's charge up for a long time to make use of it.

For now, there was only one kill he was concerned about.

He was going to deliver the killing blow to either Noctis, or the Ivory Lord.

As if answering his thoughts, a sudden movement attracted his attention, out there in the Ivory City.

And then, a thundering roar split the world apart.

...The dragon was coming.

# Chapter-731: Child of the Sun, Child of the Moon

Sunny shuddered, turning his head to the center of the Ivory City. The thunderous roar that just rolled across the flying islands chilled him to the bone, making both of his hearts stutter.

The voice of Sevirax, the Ivory Dragon, was filled with so much sorrow, wrath, and madness that every dire horror Sunny had experienced in the Kingdom of Hope paled in comparison.

It was like the voice of death itself, coming to drag them down to hell.

Taking an involuntary step back, he looked at Noctis and asked hoarsely:

"Wasn't… wasn't he supposed to be the sanest of the Chain Lords?"

The sorcerer slowly opened his eyes, remained motionless for a moment, and then rose to his feet.

"He was."

Noctis glanced in the direction of the Sky Below, where the corpse of the Sun Prince swayed forlornly, tangled in the chains.

"...He's not anymore, though."

As all of them watched, a gargantuan silhouette rose above the city. Sun glistened on the ivory scales of the great beast, and as he moved through the sky, a deep shadow covered streets and houses.

The dragon was much more beautiful, majestic, and terrifying than Sunny could have ever imagined. It radiated a feeling of power and

holiness that was so intense that it reached across dozens of islands and crashed into them like a wave, making the members of the cohort pale.

Sevirax looked more like a creature of myth than an actual monster. In fact, calling him a monster would have been unthinkable… whatever the Nightmare Creatures were, he was the opposite. His mighty body, his white scales, his shining eyes, his terrible maw, all of it was suffused with profound and dreadful splendor.

The whole body of the great beast was surrounded by a golden halo of divinity, which only Sunny could see.

…And all of that immeasurable power, all of that immolating fury, all that inhuman madness was aimed at them.

Only Noctis remained indifferent, looking at the approaching dragon with a steady gaze.

Sunny's face grew dark.

"You are going to fight… that?"

The sorcerer lingered for a moment, then glanced at him and smiled.

"He finally lost his mind. A mindless enemy is not too terrible to face…"

With that, Noctis took a step forward and glanced over his shoulder.

He said in a wistful tone:

"...Remember your promise, my friend."

In the next moment, the figure of the sorcerer shimmered, and then disappeared…

Turning into a torrent of pure light.

Sunny and the rest looked at the river of beautiful light that suddenly surged forward, pale under the bright radiance of the sun. All of them suddenly felt something moving in their hearts, as if they were

touched by the presence of true divinity.

As if they were witnessing something sacred.

As the pale light rose to meet the white dragon, it flowed and swirled, shaping itself into the form of a colossal, ghostly wolf. On his forehead, a shape of a crescent moon shined radiantly. The wolf whose body was weaved of moonlight opened its maw and let out a deafening howl.

Then, he collided with the frenzied dragon, and was obliterated.

…He was made out of nothing but ethereal light, after all.

But although the shape of the wolf was broken, the light remained. It washed over Sevirax and clung to his scales, ten thousand radiant fangs sinking into them at the same time.

It was as though the dragon was fighting a boundless swarm of fireflies instead of a single beast.

Sevirax roared in pain, and then twisted his long neck. A stream of annihilating flame shot out of his maw, destroying thousands upon thousands of motes of light.

Drops of sizzling blood fell to the ground from the skies.

Sunny stared up, paralyzed by the mind-boggling scale and otherworldly sight of the heavenly clash.

'Beast of Twilight…'

For better or for worse, he had no time to observe the fight between descendants of the gods.

In this battle, he had a role to play, too.

With a sigh, Sunny turned his gaze to the beautiful Ivory City and dashed forward.

He had to enter the Ivory City.

***

In the future, the Shipwreck Island had been connected to the Twisted Rock — and then to nothing, directly bordering the Rift after the small island crumbled into the Sky Below. However, this had not happened yet. The Rift did not even exist.

Instead, it bordered the Ivory City.

Sunny jumped down to the heavenly chain, realizing that he had traversed this one already, once. Back then, it had been rusted and sick, being slowly devoured by Chain Worms. The Mordant Mimic had run across it, escaping the awakening Wormvine while Sunny pursued.

Now, the heavenly chain looked as good as new. Trying to conserve his essence, Sunny held off on turning into a shadow and simply ran forward. With his four cores and the augmentation of four shadows, his speed was nothing short of staggering — especially because he used his long upper arms to propel himself forward, as well, running more like a beast than like a human.

As the four-armed devil shot across the chain, the two Trancendents continued their fight in the skies. He caught glimpses of it from time, or simply felt powerful shockwaves travel through the air, making his bones tremble and the heavy chain sway.

The dragon was still enveloped by the swarm of light, spewing streams of fire to burn it away. The light, however, constantly moved, breaking apart and coalescing together, changing shape, and causing more and more pain to the great beast. Sometimes, the colossal form of the ghostly wolf appeared for a short moment to deliver a vicious attack, then dissolved again to avoid retaliation.

It seemed as though Noctis was just one mistake away from being gravely wounded and broken by the dragon's flames… and yet, he was not making any mistakes. Fighting with a devious cunning and fierce will, the sorcerer always seemed one step ahead of Sevirax.

But with every flash of annihilating fire, a small part of him was destroyed.

Sunny did not know how much longer Noctis would be able to hold…

And for that reason, his task was growing more and more pressing.

He had to reach the Ivory Tower before one of the Saints fell…

# Chapter-732: Sevras

As the battle between the Ivory Dragon and the Beast of Twilight grew more and more devastating, Sunny raced across the heavenly chain and approached the walls of the Ivory City. Up above, Sevras and Noctis continued to rip each other apart, their fury terrible enough to shatter the sky.

Effie was in no condition to fight, and Cassie had exhausted all of her soul essence. She had been battered during her escape from the falling ship, as well, so the two of them stayed behind, taking care of each other.

There were only two members of their small cohort still capable of diving into the battle — Sunny and Kai. Each had their own task, and had gone their own way to complete it.

From now on and maybe until the very end of the Nightmare, Sunny would be on his own.

Summoning the Dark Wing, he pushed his way to the top of the city wall and remained there for a moment, hiding in the shadow of a graceful guard tower.

The Ivory City lay beneath him, bathed in sunlight. It was as beautiful as he had remembered… even more so, up close.

The graceful buildings were constructed of pristine white stone, with vibrant green vines crawling up their walls. Here and there, sparkling water murmured as it flowed through carved channels. Incredible aerial bridges and arching aqueducts connected dozens of flying islands together.

Now that the sun had risen, thousands upon thousands of people poured onto the streets. All of them looked healthy and beautiful, their tan, dewy skin covered by white garments. Sunny could imagine

Elyas growing up happily in this beautiful place…

In this paradise built on blood.

Right now, every person in the Ivory City was looking up at the sky, fear and awe mixing on their faces. With eyes burning with zeal, all of them were whispering prayers.

"May the Sun shine upon you, Lord Sevirax…"

"Bless us, Ivory Dragon…"

"...Protect us!"

"Protect us!"

Their prayers rose like a sea, battering into the crazed dragon that roared in sorrow and pain as the ruthless light bit into him again and again, drawing blood and driving him even deeper into the madness.

Suddenly, Sunny shivered.

He remembered what Noctis had told him once about the noble, valiant, and wise Sevras, the Ivory Lord. That he was both the sanest of them all, and the closest to utter madness.

Sevras had resisted Hope longer than any other Chain Lord… but it was precisely for that reason that he was the most susceptible to her poison. Due to his uncompromising resilience, he had maintained most of his sanity intact, and so, had never had a chance to build up a tolerance for the insidious influence of the Demon of Desire over the ages.

Now that the death of Sun Prince pushed him over the edge, everything that Sevras had been stalwartly keeping suppressed broke out of control and flooded his mind in an instant. Hundreds of years of harrowing struggle, crashing into the bastion of his sanity all at once.

…Noctis had also said that the Ivory Lord both loved and hated his people. That they were a burden that weighed heavily on his soul, one which he could not escape due to his sense of duty. That they

had bound the dragon to themselves with their faith, their devotion, their trust, and their dependency.

Looking down, Sunny saw a wide square directly under the section of the wall he was hiding at. It was crowded with thousands of people, all staring at the sky with faith and hope shining in their eyes.

Slowly, another image appeared in front of his eyes. The visage of the Twisted Rock as it had been in the future…

All of its surface had been nothing but an uneven expanse of dark stone. That stone, however, had looked really strange. It was as if once, a long time ago, it had been melted by unimaginable heat and then solidified again, creating strange shapes and swirls.

Here and there, blackened bones had protruded from the molten stone, telling the tale of countless humans and beasts who had drowned in that scorching inferno. The sight of them was eerie and disturbing, like something torn from the actual hell.

…He paled.

Below him, the citizens of the Ivory City prayed:

"Protect us!"

"Protect us!"

In the next moment, the dragon roared as he received an especially painful wound, beads of crimson blood rolling down his ivory scales.

Losing the last crumbs of sense, he twisted in the air to better see his enemy, and breathed out a torrent of immolating flame.

However, his enemy was too cunning. Noctis had positioned himself between the dragon and the crowded streets, hoping to use the city below as a shield… or maybe hoping to taunt Sevras into destroying it.

His cruel trap had worked. The stream of pale light danced out of the way of the river of fire, which fell down and engulfed the square a moment later.

Sunny staggered back.

In an instant, thousands of people were burned to death, their flesh turning to ash. The square became a scorching inferno, with even the stone itself melting and turning into incandescent lava. Cries of pain and horror filled the air. Some of the people survived and tried to flee, but the fire was everywhere around them. There was no escape…

…This was the response the Ivory Lord sent to their prayers.

Horrified, Sevirax froze in the air and looked down, shock swirling in his radiant, bestial eyes.

Sunny could practically see an internal struggle that happened in the muddled mind of the magnificent dragon.

For a short moment, the light of reason grew brighter in his eyes.

And then, it became fully extinguished.

Not caring anymore and longing for freedom, the dragon let out another furious roar, and then breathed out a powerful stream of fire, destroying a small part of the hateful enemy, but also drowning several streets of the Ivory City in flames.

Sunny stared at the slaughter, petriefied, but then shook his paralysis off.

It did not matter how vile and tragic the fate of the Ivory Dragon, and his city, had turned out to be…

All that matters was that he now had to get through the burning hell below, himself.

With a low growl, Sunny summoned the Memory of Fire into the Mantle of the Underworld and jumped down.

There was not much time left...

# Chapter-733: Inferno

As two immortals fought in the sky above the Ivory City, more and more of it became engulfed in fire. Driven mad by grief, pain, and the terrible weight of his endless life, the noble dragon had lost the last of his sanity. In his frenzy to destroy the elusive, hateful enemy, he brought down a deluge of immolating flame upon the beautiful city.

The loss of life was tremendous. The suffering of dying people was indescribable. The heat was unbearable.

Thousands died in the fire, and thousands more were being burned to ash with every minute. Panic and horror drowned the whole city, turning its citizens into a mindless mob. They tried to run, trampling countless people to death… only to be swallowed by the flame in the next second.

The buildings of white stone were melting like candles, and graceful aerial bridges that connected the island were crumbling into the abyss. Suffering, death, and destruction reigned supreme.

…And above all of it, the Ivory Tower stood, sublime and heartlessly indifferent.

Sunny traversed the dying city, witnessing the apocalyptic sight of its terrible demise. As he moved through the burning alleyways and streets, it seemed as though the whole world was coming to its end. He was surrounded by smoke, fire, and an echoing cacophony of human screams, assaulted from all sides by the ghastly smell of burning flesh and the pervasive feeling of desperate, primal fear.

The Lord of Light was the god of creation… but he was also the god of destruction. Today, this aspect of his descended upon the doomed city in all its harrowing glory.

Sunny himself was one mistake away from being destroyed.

He was running through the burning nightmare, sticking to shadows where he could and using smoke to hide his presence from the panicking mob. With his powerful claws and talons, it was not hard for him to scale buildings or propel himself off their walls to stay above the crowd. Reaching the edge of an island, he could use a bridge, an aqueduct, or a heavenly chain to reach the next one.

Sunny was fast and powerful enough to save himself from the fires that were swiftly spreading through the Ivory City, devouring flesh and stone with equal hunger. However, nothing was going to save him if Sevirax unleashed a river of flame on his head… not even the Mantle of the Underworld was going to survive a direct clash against the dragon's flame for more than a second.

All he could rely on were his intuition and quick reaction.

Reaching the edge of a large building's roof, Sunny prepared to leap over the street below… but then staggered back and dove into the shadows, appearing a dozen meters away.

A split second later, a pillar of raging flame fell from above, erasing the building he was aiming for from existence, and taking the whole street with it. The roof he was standing on was cut in half, and the whole structure shuddered, starting to collapse into the sweltering inferno.

The path forward was cut off by the annihilating fire, forcing him to change his course.

Cursing, Sunny dashed to the side, jumped down, and glanced at the sky.

Surprisingly, Noctis was still resisting the frenzied dragon.

The river of light that his transformed form consisted of looked pale and weak in the overbearing radiance of the sun. The aura of terrifying might that emanated from Sevirax made it seem even more inadequate… the difference in power between the two was clear and immense.

And yet, the Beast of Twilight was holding his own.

Now that the Ivory Lord had succumbed to madness and abandoned all reason, he had turned into a mindless beast. A great one, but a beast nevertheless. Despite being at a tremendous disadvantage, the sorcerer was using his cunning and devious malice to stay one step ahead of the enemy.

Constantly moving and shifting its form, the pale light swirled around the dragon and seeped between his scales to relentlessly bite into his flesh. Even though each wound was small and inconsequential, they brought the beast a lot of pain. From time to time, the light coalesced into the giant wolf and sank its fangs into the dragon, shattering the scales directly.

Noctis was also always careful to position himself between Sevirax and the Ivory City, forcing the crazed Chain Lord to cause more and more destruction.

The more pain Sevirax experienced, the more of his beloved city he destroyed, the deeper his madness and desperation grew, and the less reason remained in his damaged mind, making it easier for the ruthless sorcerer to fight him. The countless tiny wounds he delivered to the dragon were slowly starting to accumulate…

However, Noctis was being damaged himself, as well. Although he was able to dodge most of the flame, each time, a small part of him was irrevocably destroyed. The light that constituted him looked much paler, already…

Sunny simply could not tell who was going to win this terrible battle. He had to be prepared for both outcomes.

…Just as Noctis had told him, as the two clashing Transcendents circled in the sky, they slowly moved toward the Ivory Tower. Sunny was getting closer to it, too. He had already traversed half a dozen islands, somehow managing to suffer only a couple of serious burns. Now, only a few chains separated him from the great pagoda itself.

As he climbed onto the last island before the one he was aiming for, a terrible roar suddenly thundered from above, making the whole world shudder.

Falling to his knees, Sunny pressed his hands against his ears and looked up, stunned.

What he saw made him freeze in shock.

The great dragon Sevirax…

Was falling.

His ivory scales were painted red, and a large chunk of flesh was missing from his neck. A river of sizzling blood was flowing from the terrible wound, and one of his mighty wings seemed to be broken. Unable to support his weight in the air, the dragon plummeted from the skies and crashed heavily into the Ivory Island, raising a cloud of dust and disappearing from view.

Sunny swayed, then slowly stood up.

'C—crazy bastard… he actually did it…'

Noctis... had won?

Turning around, he searched the sky and saw the form of a ghostly wolf being engulfed in flame. The pale light was being swiftly devoured by it, and then disappeared entirely.

Instead, a small human figure fell down, landing somewhere far away in the city.

He knew that Noctis was still alive… the sorcerer was immortal, after all. However, Sunny doubted that he would be able to recover any time soon.

It did not matter, though.

The sorcerer had already done his part. Sevirax was mortally wounded, and all that remained was to thrust the knife into his flesh, making the wound actually kill him.

Sunny dashed forward. The Ivory Tower loomed above him, obstructing the sky. He just had to reach the edge of the island and traverse one last chain to approach its foundation.

The island he was currently traversing was devoid of any buildings. Instead, there was just one tall, jagged piece of white rock protruding from its center, with soot-covered chains hanging from it.

Not paying it any attention, Sunny ran to the aerial bridge that led to the Ivory Island.

As he approached it, however, he slowed down, and then stopped completely.

…A lone human figure was sitting on the steps leading to the bridge.

The stranger was relaxed and seemingly unconcerned by the titanic battle that had just taken place. With his back turned to the Ivory Tower, the man was looking directly at Sunny...

Waiting for him.

# Chapter-734: Final Obstacle

The Ivory Island was separated from the rest of the city by a wide chasm. Once, it had been connected to seven islands by seven unbreakable chains.

Now, only two remained.

There had been several arching bridges leading to it, as well, but most of them long collapsed. Only one still stood, arching and monumental, built of pristine white stone.

An old man with a wrinkled face and grey hair was sitting on the steps leading to the bridge, dressed in a white tunic. It was different from the clothes most of the citizens wore, resembling that of a priest. The man had a frail body and pale blue eyes.

The old man's face was strangely calm. He observed the burning city with solemn indifference, as if the weight of years made him numb to the cruelties of the mortal realm. Even though his world was ending, the elder remained poised and dignified.

Noticing the approaching devil, the old man tiredly leaned on his cane.

"Stop, creature! This is a sacred land… you are not allowed to go further."

Sunny stopped a few meters away from the stranger and studied him for a few moments. Then, he sighed and said, his voice even:

"Why the charade? Drop it, Mordret."

The old man looked at him with confusion, then suddenly grinned. His whole presence suddenly shifted, becoming much more energetic and unrestrained. He laughed dryly, and then shook his head.

"Ah, what a pity. What gave me away?"

Sunny shrugged.

"I knew that you would show up sooner or later. And there's not much of later left."

Mordret, who inhabited the old and frail body, smiled.

"True, true. Thank you very much, Sunless! You have fulfilled my request to keep Noctis alive very well. In fact…"

His face darkened a little.

"...I'd say that you even performed a little bit too well. Who could have thought that the Beast of Twilight would still win, despite not having the Night Oracle's support? That… ah, it makes me feel as though all my ordeals in the north were a bit silly."

The old man sighed, but then smiled again.

"Well, no matter. It can still be salvaged… however, I was very serious. Sorry to say this, but you can't go any further, Sunless."

Sunny tilted his head a little, staring at Mordret with a dark expression.

"Oh, yeah? How are you going to kill that damned dragon without my knife? I am sure you know that I visited the Temple of the Chalice…"

The old man gave him a polite nod.

"Oh, I do! That was rather spectacular. But, Sunless… you see, that is exactly why I can't allow you to cross that bridge."

Sunny frowned.

"What do you mean? Why?"

Mordret looked at him with surprise.

"Well… because I need Sevras alive, of course! Killing him would ruin

months of torturous effort I put into preparing everything. Remaining in this feeble body all that time was not very pleasant, you know… but there are very few people that the Ivory Lord allows to tend to him, and this priest was the best choice."

Sunny gritted his teeth, then uttered with frustration:

"Keep Noctis alive… keep Sevras alive… damn it! What the hell do you actually hope to achieve, Mordret? You are clearly not planning to free Hope… what else can end this Nightmare? What do you want?!"

The old man blinked a couple of times, confusion appearing on his face.

"Free… Hope?"

He thought for a moment, then shook his head with a smile.

"Of course, I am not here to free Hope. That is not the reason why I entered this Seed..."

His smile twisted slightly, a disturbing glint igniting in his eyes.

"I am here to kill her."

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As the words echoed in the silence, Sunny stared at the frail old man with a deep frown. Then, he threw his head back and laughed.

"Kill her… kill Hope?! Have you completely lost your mind, Mordret?"

The banished prince shifted slightly, then said in a neutral tone.

"...Not completely."

Sunny clenched his fists, then shook his head in indignation.

"She is a daemon, you fool! A divine being! A god! How are you, a mere Awakened, going to kill her? How can you hope to even scratch

her?!"

Mordret shrugged, then looked at him with a friendly smile.

"Why... have you never wanted to kill a god?"

Sunny stared at him with wide eyes.

"I am of a rather high opinion of myself, but I am not delusional. I know my limits, Mordret… don't you?"

The old man sighed.

"It's not like killing a god is impossible. They are all dead, after all. However, I understand your concern. I would not have wanted to face the Demon of Desire in battle…"

He lingered for a moment, and then added:

"But she is not exactly able to fight right now, is she? She is bound, sapped of most of her powers. Imprisoned for a thousand years… so, you see, I can't let you go breaking more of her chains. Your part is done, Sunless. Leave the rest to me… I will conquer this Nightmare for both of us. Well...

and reap the reward, of course."

Sunny bared his fangs.

"She might not be as powerful as she had been before Sun God put her in chains, but she is still a creature of Divine Rank. Your power alone will not be enough to wound her, let alone kill her… you are insane. Hope's poison must have gotten to you!"

Mordret smiled.

"Ah, you are correct. I am not powerful enough to kill her alone. That is why I have spent months carefully putting a few useful ideas into the Ivory Lord's muddled mind. I needed Noctis to give him a little push, though… kill his brother, destroy his city. You did well to assist him!"

A dangerous gleam appeared in the old man's eyes.

"Now that Sevras has nothing left, he will direct his endless ire on Hope. That will be my chance. So, Sunless… I would advise you to stand down. If you truly know your limits, you won't stand in my way."

Sunny stared at Mordret for a few moments, his eyes growing darker and darker. A tense silence settled between the two of them.

Then, a swirl of sparks appeared around the devil's hand.

The old man looked at it, his gaze growing sharp and cold.

He was waiting to see what weapon Sunny was going to summon…

However, Sunny did not summon a weapon.

Instead, an exquisite wooden chair appeared in his hand.

Glaring at Mordret, Sunny put the chair on the ground, sat on it, and crossed his arms.

"Well… go on, then. What are you waiting for? I wish you luck!"

# Chapter-735: Settling Debts

Sunny sat comfortably on the elegant wooden chair, staring at Mordret with all four of his arms crossed. The chair was a bit small for his prodigious body, but due to the quality and durability of the materials it was made of, it managed to carry the weight rather well.

Noctis really knew the value of good craftmanship!

The old man, meanwhile, met his deadpan gaze with a mildly surprised expression slowly appearing on his face.

All around them, the Ivory City was being devoured by fire.

After a while, Mordret shifted a little, and then said with amusement:

"...To be honest, I expected you to attack me."

Sunny scoffed.

"Why would I bother? You seem to be hellbent on committing suicide. I can just wait until Hope kills you, then carry on with my initial plans."

He thought for a bit, and then added:

"Plus, in the improbable case that you somehow succeed, I don't really lose anything. I will still become a Master. Sure, the great and mighty clan Valor might suffer as the result, but what do I care? I have no relationship with them."

The old man glanced at him with a pleasant smile.

"That bow of yours suggests otherwise."

Sunny chuckled.

"My warbow? Do you like it? Well, I like it very much. What a beauty… your family really knows how to craft a Memory! However, you are mistaken if you think that I received it for rendering some service to Valor or being close to your father. In fact, they don't even know that I have it.

Uh… I would prefer if it stayed that way, too."

Mordret tilted his head a little.

"Have no worry, Sunless... your secret is safe with me! All your secrets, actually. I have to admit, though, with how paranoid you are, I thought that you would try to silence me at all costs. Aren't you afraid that I will reveal them after escaping from the Nightmare?"

Sunny smiled lazily, then shrugged.

"Not really."

He sighed, and then said in a serious tone:

"While it pains me that you know so much about me, you and I are similar in many ways. We both believe that knowledge is the origin of power, don't we? So, sharing my secrets would be no different from giving your power away. Why share the leverage you have on me with anyone when you can have it all to yourself?"

Sunny's expression grew a little dour.

"Of course, I would gladly kill you to destroy that leverage. However, the benefit of destroying you is not worth the risk of fighting you. You are one scary bastard, Mordret, you know that? Plus… I don't even know how to kill you… so what's the point?"

He was not lying. Although Sunny had grown more powerful than he had expected inside the Nightmare, Mordret was much older and had vastly more experience. He also had a far greater background.

If Sunny's suspicions were correct, not only had the Prince of Nothing inherited the lineage of War God, but he had also been raised by both Great Clan Valor and Asterion… he was a monster created by not one, but two Sovereigns.

A monster capable enough to, maybe, outshine both of them.

How could an outskirt rat like Sunny compete with that upbringing?

He couldn't…

Yet. At least not in a direct fight.

A competition of wit, on the other hand...

Who could say which one of them was more devious?

As Sunny stared at him with a smile, Mordret remained silent for a few moments, and then slowly stood up.

"What remarkable restraint… are you sure you don't want to attack me, Sunless?"

Sunny shook his head.

"I really don't want to."

The old man looked at him, then said with uncertainty:

"Well… I'll be going then?"

He lingered for a few moments before turning around and taking a step away.

Sunny cleared his throat.

"There is one problem, though."

Mordret froze, then faced him again, an amused smile appearing on his lips.

His eyes glistened dangerously.

"Oh?"

Sunny sighed.

"As much as I don't want to fight you… and as much as I wish you

luck in ending this Nightmare… I am a very, very petty person. I also have a great memory. I tend to remember my grudges."

He raised a hand and started counting on his fingers.

"You used me, lured me into a trap, put me in hot water with clan Valor, caused me and my friend weeks of terrible suffering, almost cost us our lives, and then even tried to kill me yourself! You really, really owe me a lot, Mordret… don't you think?"

The old man grinned.

"Ah, I see how you could have been a little upset with my actions. Well, how do you suppose we should settle my debt, Sunless?"

Sunny made himself more comfortable and smiled. Then, he said in a cheerful tone:

"...I accept Transcendent Memories. Six or seven should do."

Mordret stared at him for a bit, then laughed.

"I see. Sadly, that would not be very convenient for me. Anything else you might consider?"

Sunny looked at him with regret.

"Well… in that case, there is one other thing. I guess I can just prevent you from killing Hope, ruin the plans you've been making for the better part of the decade, torture you ruthlessly for a few weeks, and then slowly destroy your body. That should make us even, I think."

Mordret looked at him with a somber expression.

"...I thought you couldn't lie. Didn't you say that you wouldn't attack me?"

Sunny shook his head.

"I said that I don't want to attack you. Never said that I won't."

The old man sighed.

"Yes, I noticed. Pity. I hoped to avoid this…"

With that, the shadows around Sunny suddenly shifted and moved.

A moment later, five identical four-armed devils rose from them, each at least three meters tall. They wore fearsome onyx armors, with darkness veiling their bestial faces and black eyes.

Each had four horns, and each had one of them broken. The devils radiated a suffocating, frightening feeling of malice and furious power.

Still sitting on his chair, Sunny stared at the five shadowspawns that surrounded him with trepidation. His face grew still.

Gripping the Extraordinary Rock, he shivered and said glumly:

"Well, that's… that's not good at all…"

# Chapter-736: Surrounded

Five Reflections surrounded Sunny, each bearing his own image. The towering shadowkin devils looked nothing short of terrifying. Their gaunt, ironclad figures emanated a feeling of profound threat and malice, and their black eyes peered at him with inhuman intensity. It was deeply disturbing.

'Damn... am I that scary?'

Sunny leaned on the backrest of his chair and said without skipping a pause:

"Lost from Light… kill that wicked old man!"

The Reflections continued to stare at him, unmoving. A few moments passed, but nothing happened.

An awkward silence hung in the air.

Mordret chuckled.

"You didn't really think that this trick would work again, did you?"

He smiled, then glanced at the shadow devils with satisfaction.

"Naturally, I bound them to myself before you arrived."

Sunny glared at the old man for a bit, then looked away and shrugged.

"Well… it was worth a try, anyway."

'Disappointing…'

He studied the Reflections for a second, trying to determine how powerful they were, exactly.

Unlike how Mordret had appeared during their soul battle, now, Sunny could only see one weak core in the frail body of the old man. It was dim and unremarkable, hinting that he was looking at the priest's own soul… or at least its perfect imitation. It seemed that determining which body the Prince of Nothing possessed in that manner was impossible. His own soul was perfectly hidden.

The Reflections, on the other hand, were different… and quite bizarre. Sunny could see shadow cores inside each of the creatures, but despite looking like shadow devils, none of them were.

All of them were Ascended, but two out of five were mere Beasts. Two more were Monsters, and one was a Demon. Sunny had no idea how the Class progression worked when it came to Reflections, but he suspected that they were less powerful than the Mirror Beast, their elder sibling, had been.

Mirror Beast had lived a much longer life and risen to an Ascended Devil, after all.

…Still, five Ascended Reflections were most likely more than enough to rip him to shreds. Especially considering that each of them was reflecting a wielder of a Divine Aspect.

Sunny looked at Mordret, hesitated, and said somberly:

"Very impressive… but also a bit underwhelming. I guess slaughtering thousands of mundane humans was not very nourishing for your monsters, huh? Now that I see them, I do agree that your accomplishments in the north might have been silly."

The old man looked at him with a dark expression.

"They're still enough to kill you."

Sunny grinned.

"Oh, let's not. You are not going to kill me."

Mordret raised an eyebrow.

"What makes you say that?"

Sitting comfortably on his chair, Sunny shrugged.

"What's the point? I am more useful to you alive. Plus, if you get rid of me, you can say goodbye to all the wonderful Memories I possess. I would have been a bit scared if you had weeks to torture me into surrendering them… but you don't."

The old man smiled.

"This is a very reasonable answer. However… are you that sure I am a reasonable man, Sunless?

Sunny felt a cold shiver run down his spine and forced out a weak smile.

"Ah… no. Not really. I am not sure. In any case, you are also underestimating me."

Mordret frowned.

"How so? Your allies seem to have abandoned you. Your Shadows are wounded and can't be summoned again. What can you do against Reflections?"

Glancing at the towering shadow devils with apprehension, Sunny lingered for a few moments, and then said:

"Well, if you put it like that, it does seem like I can't do much. They are all very powerful, indeed. I am already a bit of a menace, and these things possess all of my powers, wielding them with the might of Ascendeds no less. However…"

He shifted his gaze to the old man, a wicked smile appearing on his lips.

"The same can't be said about you, can it? You sacrificed all your cores to create these Reflections. By now, you could have succeeded in creating one, maybe two. That still makes you weaker than me. More than that, I couldn't help to notice that your Aspect, terrifying as it might be, doesn't offer you any direct combat augmentations. It's all pure Utility.

So, while I can't kill your monsters…"

His eyes grew darker, suffused with a dangerous glow.

"...I probably stand a good chance of destroying your body before they can stop me."

His four shadows were wrapped around his body, filling it with explosive might. There were just a few meters separating him from the frail old man… he could breach that distance in an instant.

Mordret opened his eyes wide, took a shaky step back, and raised his hands to protect himself.

"Oh, no! Please, don't! What would I do without a body?!"

Then, he shook his head and laughed.

"It's not like there's a whole city full of people I can take, right? Come to think of it… maybe I'll travel outside the city, find one of your allies, and wear them instead. Which one should I pick, huh? The child or the cripple? I can kill two birds with one stone and deal with that infuriating oracle of yours at the same time. That is a great idea, don't you think?"

Sunny grew quiet.

"...No, I don't think that it's a great idea."

The old man looked at him darkly, then shook his head and turned around.

"I suggest that you don't move, Sunless. My Reflections won't kill you, but that doesn't mean that they will be gentle. Pain is pain..."

With that, he started climbing the steps leading to the bridge.

Sunny stared at his back, gritting his teeth, then summoned the Dying Wish. As soon as the charm weaved itself and merged with the Mantle of the Underworld, he sent all four of his shadows to wrap themselves around the onyx armor, thus augmenting its [Underworld Armament] enchantment four times over.

Already strengthened by it, the effect of the Dying Wish became tremendously enhanced.

Memory Enchantments: [Death Wish].

Enchantment Description: [Those who witness the wielder of this Memory are compelled; friends to be inspired, foes to seek the wielder out.]

Already a few steps away, Mordret suddenly slowed down, swayed a little, and then turned around.

His face was tense and full of fury.

"Argh… what…"

He stared at Sunny with madness and bloodlust in his eyes, then grimaced.

"What a... vile Memory. Nice trick, Sunless. But it won't work on me."

The old man smiled with disdain, then suddenly froze. Slowly, a deep scowl appeared on his face.

"But why would you… why would you want me to attack, Sunless? That doesn't make any sense… you know how dangerous I am. Unless, of course…"

His eyes widened.

At the same time, Sunny grinned.

And far away from them, across the vast expanse of emptiness leading to the Ivory Island, a small figure appeared from the darkness of the Sky Below, flying swiftly toward the bleeding dragon.

# Chapter-737: Self-Reflection

After Solvane and Sun Prince had been defeated and the light of dawn washed over the shattered remains of the Kingdom of Hope, bringing with it the frenzied fury of the Ivory Dragon, Sunny knew that Sevirax would not be the only obstacle in their way.

Throughout all of it, he had never forgotten about Mordret. In truth, he was warier of the banished prince of Valor than he was of the immortal Saints, no matter how powerful and dreadful they were.

The full force of a great clan had failed to contain the Prince of Nothing. So what hope did Sunny have?

Of course, he was not sure that Mordret would end up as their adversary in this Nightmare. They were allies during this hellish trial, after all… at least in theory.

But he could not discount the possibility. The advice Master Jet had given Sunny before he ventured into the Seed stuck with him. Most of the hard-won wisdom she had shared in the past ended up being instrumental to his survival, so he made sure to remember her words.

For that reason, Sunny and Kai agreed on a very simple plan.

One of them took the Obsidian Knife, and the other took the Glass Knife. Depending on which of the immortals fell, one man was going to finish the job, while the other was going to prevent the Prince of Nothing from intervening, in case the need to do so arose.

As the saying went, it was unwise to put all your eggs in one basket…

The type of egg Sunny had the most experience with had belonged to a Great Devil, so he was not quite sure why exactly keeping eggs in a basket was so detrimental. But he did agree with the general idea.

And so, from the moment the frail old man appeared in his view, Sunny had pursued a single goal.

He had to keep the attention of Mordret and all five of his Reflections on himself.

Even though there was a small possibility that he could emerge victorious if the two of them clashed in earnest, Sunny did not consider his chances of defeating the banished prince in battle high… especially not while being exhausted after the furious assault on the flying fleet and devoid of the support of his Shadows.

He had never intended to actually fight Mordret. All he wanted to do was to stall him.

For that reason, Sunny engaged Mordret in a lengthy conversation, created the false perception that he was still in possession of the Glass Knife by asking a few misleading questions, and provoked his opponent into revealing the five Reflections.

Perhaps the Prince of Nothing was poisoned by Hope enough to lose a small part of his cunning, or perhaps he fell for the trap that awaited most habitual liars and failed to account for how warped his impression of people was. Perhaps he underestimated how proficient Sunny grew in utilizing his Flaw for his own benefit.

In any case, for once, Mordret ended up as the one being manipulated instead of the one pulling the strings. Sunny might have not been stronger than him, but he did manage to outwit the banished prince.

Today, he turned out to be the more devious of the two, even if just barely. He won the fight without lifting a finger, using only a wooden chair and his devilish tongue.

Well… to be precise, he did not even use his tongue. He used a rock instead.

As soon as all Reflections revealed themselves, Kai started to move. And by the time he reached the Ivory Island… it was already too late to stop him.

Almost.

The Prince of Nothing still could have used his Aspect to move through the reflections and invade the archer's soul. However… Kai was wearing the anvil amulet that Sunny had given him.

This talisman had been forged by the Sovereign of Valor himself, and made the wearer immune to Mordret's soul possession. Even if the banished prince jumped through the reflections into Kai's eyes, he was not going to be able to possess him.

That left only the Reflections, which were currently turned into copies of Sunny and wielded his Divine Aspect. Each had access to the Memories he wore and his Aspect Abilities… including Shadow Step. They could still reach the island in time to prevent Kai from delivering the killing blow to Sevirax.

...Sunny had to stop them at all costs and buy his friend a few precious seconds.

But that was easier said than done!

As a small human figure streaked from the darkness of the Sky Below toward the slumped silhouette of the Ivory Dragon, Mordret swiftly turned and narrowed his eyes, instantly realizing that he had been played.

Before he could react, however, a tide of shadows suddenly exploded from the small lantern hanging on Sunny's waist, enveloping everything around them in impenetrable darkness. The light of the sun was swiftly destroying the shadows, but at the same time, it was being devoured by the lantern, creating a strange equilibrium.

The shadows themselves were ancient, deep, and resilient. Sunny had collected them from the dark sides of the islands surrounding the Sanctuary before departing for the war.

With no light remaining around them, there were also no reflections. With no reflections, Mordret was robbed of a large part of his power for a moment.

That did not help at all against the five Reflections, though, since

each of them was as comfortable in the shadows as Sunny himself was. They were his perfect copies, after all…

Knowing that, Sunny decided to try a desperate gamble.

The Mantle of the Underworld was still augmented by four shadows, its [Underworld Armament] enchantment empowering the Dying Wish's effect manifold. Sunny himself was strongly affected by the compelling aura of the charm, feeling an almost irresistible urge to throw himself at the Reflections and tear them apart.

However, this sensation was swiftly disappearing, since he had already dismissed the iron statuette.

Instead, he summoned the Broken Oath into the onyx armor.

…And since the five Reflections were mirroring him, each of them reflected that change, too. Only the Demon turned out to be smart enough to stop himself and consider the consequences. The Beasts and Monsters failed to realize the result of their actions in time.

Mordret moved, and so did the shadow devils.

But just as they did…

The vile charm fully weaved itself into existence. Augmented by the enchantment of the Mantle of the Underworld, its soul-eroding aura was strengthened and flowed outward like invisible poison. The armor, however, was itself augmented four times over by Sunny's shadows, making the empowering effect tremendously more pronounced.

And on top of that…

Four out of the five Reflections suddenly emanated the same ferocious aura.

The five overcharged fields of soul erosion merged together, turning into something far more vicious and destructive than the sum of its parts.

Into something truly horrid.

Even though the Mantle of the Underworld provided Sunny with a substantial degree of resistance against soul attacks, he couldn't help but let out a scream. The Reflections opened their mouths in agony, too, although no sound came out of them.

Mordret, however…

Mordret did not enjoy the same protection that Sunny and the Reflections received from the onyx armor.

# Chapter-738: Soul Annihilation

The [Underworld Armament] allowed the Mantle to accommodate and augment a charm Memory, channeling its enchantment as if it was inherent to the armor itself. That alone made the Mantle of the Underworld incredibly flexible.

What was more, this quality truly shined when wielded by Sunny. He could have augmented the Broken Oath with his four shadows, but chose to wrap them around his armor instead… achieving an even better result. Not only was the effect of the augmentation shared and enhanced, but all the other enchantments of the Mantle of the Underworld were augmented as well.

Among them was [Stalwart], which granted him extremely high protection against physical attacks, high protection against elemental attacks, and — most importantly — a moderate amount of protection against mind and soul attacks.

Currently, the Mantle was simultaneously radiating a tremendously damaging soul-annihilation aura and providing him with vastly increased resistance to soul damage.

Even then, when five of these auras clashed and combined together, he let out a scream and collapsed to the ground, consumed by harrowing agony. His already wounded soul was being frayed and eroded at a terrible rate, and all he could do was writhe on the ground, barely clinging to any resemblance of consciousness.

The five Reflections were not doing much better.

Even though their Ascended souls, or whatever it was they had instead of souls, possessed a far better quality due to a superior Rank, they had fewer cores.

While that was not enough to make them succumb to soul

annihilation faster than Sunny by itself, that also meant that they had fewer shadows, and therefore their reflected versions of the Mantle enjoyed less augmentation, providing them with less resistance to soul damage.

What it all meant… Sunny had no idea. He could not guess who was going to be destroyed first — the Reflections or him. As far as he could tell, their chances were about equal.

However…

Things were very different when it came to Mordret.

Unlike Sunny and the Reflections, he did not enjoy the protection of the Mantle of the Underworld. He was also only able to steal the Aspect of the body he possessed, while his own strange and terrible ability to mirror someone's powers only worked inside the victim's soul. He could not simply copy the onyx armor onto himself, nor could he augment it.

For the moment… Mordret was defenseless.

With a startled yelp, the old man awkwardly fell to his knees and then rolled down the steps, ending up on the ground not too far away from Sunny. A stifled howl escaped from his lips, and his eyes opened wide, full of shock and terrible pain. The suffering Sunny and the Reflections experienced affected him so much worse.

Any other Awakened would have been swiftly destroyed, but the Prince of Nothing persisted, somehow. Several swirls of sparks instantly appeared around his body, heralding the appearance of protective Memories. Who knew how vast and powerful his soul arsenal was? Mordret could have possessed a Memory capable of turning the tide of events completely.

But very few Memories were capable of manifesting themselves instantly. Most took several precious seconds to appear, and usually, the more powerful ones took the longest. By the time the sparks of light turned into tangible objects, he could have been either already dead or too severely damaged to be able to act.

Writhing in agony, Sunny threw a burning look at the old man and gritted his teeth so hard that his fangs pierced his lip, sending drops of blood rolling down.

'Die! Die, you bastard! Just hurry up and die!'

A desperate hope that Mordret would fail to survive the soul annihilation filled his hearts, despite the fact that Sunny did not really think that getting rid of the prince would be so easy. He seriously doubted that Mordret would allow himself to be killed in this fashion…

Not to mention that as far as he knew, the Prince of Nothing was as immortal as the cursed Transcendents of the Kingdom of Hope. Both his physical and spirit bodies had been destroyed in the past, but that did not stop Mordret from continuing to exist, somehow. The great clan Valor certainly did not lack means of dealing soul damage, but they had failed to get rid of his reflection.

'I don't care! Just die!'

Sunny would have been satisfied with just destroying Mordret's mortal shell, anyway. His true task was to buy Kai enough time to kill the Ivory Dragon, and forcing the prince to search for another body would do just that.

Sadly, Mordret had the same idea.

If he had lost all reason because of the pain, things could have turned differently, but the Prince of Nothing was nothing if not coolheaded and calculating. Despite the terrible suffering of having his soul slowly torn to pieces, he kept some of his composure and ability to think intact.

Twisting, Mordret struggled to raise his head and looked in the direction of one of the Reflections. The shadowspawn was on his knees, his bestial face contorted by a grimace of agony. The Prince of Nothing paled, and then whispered something.

A moment later, the figure of the kneeling devil rippled and shattered like a piece of glass. Something swift and intangible moved through

the air and entered Mordret's body.

Then, another Reflection shattered... and then another, and then another. In an instant, four of the five — both Beasts and both Monsters — were gone, leaving a lone Demon behind.

As they disappeared, the components of the soul-annihilating field disappeared as well. Only Sunny's own augmented aura was left to spread the invisible poison.

He let out a trembling sigh of relief, and then dismissed the Broken Oath entirely.

Almost at the same time, a silver bracelet, a necklace made of strange black pearls, and a bone scepter appeared on Mordret's body and in his hand. Each of the Memories, without a doubt, provided him with a degree of soul protection… but by now, they were of no use.

With his soul in shambles and barely keeping itself together, Sunny remained laying on the ground. He groaned, and then threw a tired glance at his enemy. The flood of soul essence he was sending into the Shadow Lantern had run dry, and the sunlight finally prevailed, dismantling the dome of shadows that surrounded them.

Mordret looked… different, somehow.

The old man's body remained the same, but now, a subtle sensation of immense, turbulent power emanated from it. As if Sunny was facing a titan instead of a man.

'No... way… could it be?'

Two Monsters and two Beasts… between the four of them, they had shared six soul cores. Had Mordret not dismissed the Reflections, but actually absorbed them in order to strengthen his soul and survive the powerful attack?

How did it even work? How could an Awakened absorb Ascended cores? Would they weaken, or would all that excess power rip his soul to shreds from the inside?

Sunny did not know.

All he knew was that he was utterly beaten and spent, and there was an Ascended Demon and an Awakened Titan in the guise of an old man in front of him, wrath burning in their eyes.

But that… did not matter.

Because at that moment, an inhuman, pained cry rolled across the empty expanse of the empty void and reached their ears.

It was the voice of the Ivory Dragon, Sevirax.

His dying breath...

# Chapter-739: Empty Skies

While Sunny and Mordret struggled to survive as their souls were being destroyed…

A human figure emerged from the darkness of the Sky Below and shot into the sunlight, flying with incredible speed. It was a man with skin that looked like polished bark and a burned, disfigured face.

His armor was battered and painted dull by dried blood, and the quiver attached to his belt was long empty. The man had been an officer of the Sun Legion once, but now, he returned to kill its commander.

His eyes were full of resolve.

Months had passed since the terrible day when Kai and his most brave soldiers were chained to the white cliff on the Sacrifice Island and left there to be devoured by the Ivory Dragon. Who could have thought that he would be back to this cursed place so soon?

Leaving the heat of the burning city behind, Kai had hidden himself under the island where his comrades were turned to ash by the dragon's flame, waited for Sunny to get the full attention of the prince of Valor, and then dashed forward without looking back.

He did not wish to see the white cliff and the soot-covered chains hanging from its surface ever again.

Flying under the last bridge connecting the rest of the city to the Ivory Island, he avoided being noticed too soon, and then ascended into the sunlight. Behind him, a dome of shadows suddenly appeared at the entrance to the bridge, hiding his friend from sight.

With his heart growing heavy, Kai soared above the emerald grass of the Ivory City and finally saw his goal.

A magnificent dragon was laying on the ground, blood streaming from his mangled neck. His white scales were painted crimson, and one of his wings was broken. But the great beast was still alive. He was still breathing.

He was immortal, after all…

But not for long.

In his hand, Kai held a knife made of ghostly glass. Inside the knife, the dragon's fate was sealed, placed there by a ruthless god.

Was Kai breaking the will of the gods by delivering it back to its owner? Or completing their design?

He did not know, and he did not care.

All he cared about was killing the dragon.

Kai had never been very strong, or very brave, or very smart. It took him a long time to grow a little. He was not a person of great conviction, either. But if there was one thing he believed, it was that Sevirax had to die, and that his ghastly reign had to end.

The beautiful city he ruled was just too vile.

Gritting his teeth, Kai ignored the pain that had tormented him for months and lunged at the gargantuan form of the dragon.

The Glass Knife glistened in his hand…

But even terribly wounded, the immortal Transcendent was still immensely powerful and deadly. How could a mere Awakened ever hope to wound him?

Before Kai could thrust the ghostly blade into the exposed flesh on the great beast's neck, Sevirax suddenly stirred. His eyelids flew up, revealing inhuman amber eyes. His maw opened slightly, wisps of smoke escaping it…

The dragon moved his healthy wing, and a torrent of wind crashed into Kai, sending him spinning. The glass knife scratched uselessly

against impenetrable scales, and he was thrown away.

A moment later, a giant claw brushed across his chest. The young man dashed away in time to avoid being killed, but just this light touch was enough to rip his breastplate open and shatter a few of his ribs.

With a groan, Kai fell on the soft grass. His speed was so great that his body slid for a few dozen meters, and by the time he rose shakily to his knees, the dragon was already looking at him, ready to attack.

A hint of confusion surfaced from the ocean of madness hidden in his eyes.

Sevirax lingered for a moment, and then, a low, tired, sonorous voice resounded from all around them:

"You… I know you…"

Kai gritted his teeth.

His surprise attack had failed… he failed.

Now that the Transcendent was aware of him, there was little chance of delivering the fateful strike. No matter how wounded and exhausted the Ivory Lord was, he would still be immeasurably faster, stronger, and more powerful than an Awakened with a weak Aspect. He would crush Kai in an instant.

The immortal was not going to die. Hope was not going to escape. The Nightmare was not going to end…

His friends would not be saved.

Kai might have been able to fly through the sky and see far and wide…

But he was no dragon.

The man with a disfigured face looked at the immortal beast towering in front of him. He shook slightly, and then lowered his head.

...And then, he lunged forward, sending bits of torn grass into the air.

He was fast, incredibly fast… but Sevirax was faster. The great beast twisted his neck, protecting the wound left on it by the fangs of the Beast of Twilight, and then opened his maw to crush the small human between his jaws.

Perhaps Kai could have dodged…

But he didn't.

Instead, he accelerated even more and flew straight into the dragon's maw, which instantly closed, giant fangs striking against each other with a deafening sound.

Just like that, the crippled man was gone.

The dragon froze for a moment, stunned by the little human's unflinching bravery.

…Then, he suddenly shuddered and let out a tortured cry.

Kai, who had plunged the Glass Knife into the soft flesh of the great beast's tongue, was thrown back and crashed heavily onto the ground. His bark-like skin was smoldering, scorched once again by the heat of the dragon's flame. His armor was disintegrating.

And the Ivory Lord, meanwhile, was becoming mortal again.

Now that his fate had been returned to him, the terrible wound on his neck was sapping him of life. A few seconds more, and it was going to kill him.

But no... not yet!

As a long, sorrowful cry of the great beast echoed across the burning city, Sevras stubbornly refused to die. Straining his battered body, he slowly crawled forward, desperately trying to reach the Ivory Tower.

Which he had sworn to protect.

Leaving a trail of blood behind, the beautiful white dragon

torturously wrapped his body around the great pagoda and tiredly lowered his head to the ground in front of its gates. His eyes slowly closed.

It was his… his duty.

To protect it.

He was going to, even in death.

He promised…

Laying on the soft grass in the middle of a burning inferno, the dragon let out a soft breath.

He imagined a different picture…

A picture of a beautiful white city, its streets bathing in gentle sunlight... full of happy and kind people... thriving, peaceful, and safe.

A few moments later, Sevras, the Blessed of the Sun, was dead.

# Chapter-740: Dream is Collapsing

As the Ivory Dragon died, an invisible ripple spread through the world. The whole city trembled slightly, and then, one of the two remaining chains that bound the Ivory Island to the rest of Hope's shattered kingdom broke with a deafening ring.

The broken chain fell into the darkness of the Sky Below, leaving only a single tether holding the island in place. The island's position shifted… not by much, but enough to cause the arching stone bridge to crack, shudder, and then slowly crumble.

A cloud of stone dust rose into the air as the massive structure collapsed, enveloping the patch of grass where Sunny and Mordret lay, still reeling from the deadly soul attack.

Sunny coughed and waved his hand in front of his face, weakly trying to chase the dust away.

'Damnation…'

The Prince of Nothing, meanwhile, was slowly rising to his feet. With a stagger, he regained his footing and looked in the direction of the Ivory Tower, his old face growing dim.

Mordret remained silent for a while, and then said evenly:

"Well, that… is a bit unfortunate."

Sunny let out a hoarse laugh, causing the old man to turn around and glance at him darkly. Then, he tried to sit up, but failed.

The Prince of Nothing scoffed.

"Drop the act, Sunless. I know you are not that weakened."

Sunny cursed, then stopped pretending and sat up with a groan. He was indeed in a very bad shape, drained of essence, and barely alive because of how severely damaged his soul was. However, he was indeed not as weak as he had wanted to mislead Mordret into believing.

The old man shook his head, then smiled.

"Using my own Reflections against me… how clever. I expected something like that from you."

Then, his face abruptly grew dark, and he gazed in the direction of the Ivory Tower once again. His voice sounded quiet and uncertain:

"That, however… that I did not expect at all. It should not have been possible! I don't understand… giving one of the knives away is not in your nature. With how cynical and distrustful you are, you should have clung to them to the end… how did I make this mistake?"

Sunny grinned.

"I guess I've changed."

Mordret frowned, then slowly shook his head.

"People don't change that easily."

The grin on Sunny's face became a little brittle.

"...It wasn't easy."

The old man remained motionless for a while, then sighed heavily and turned around to face him. At the same time, his remaining Reflection did the same.

The Prince of Nothing stared at the battered shadow devil for a few moments, then said amiably:

"Sunless, my friend… please give me one reason why I shouldn't kill you."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then answered with a dark smile:

"In case you didn't notice, people who try to kill me tend to end up dead instead."

Mordret grinned dangerously.

"I am sure I can manage."

'Well… crap. I'm a bit sure myself.'

He tilted his head, then said doubtfully:

"Because I still have the Divine Memory you want to get your hands on?"

The old man took a step forward, causing the Reflection to do the same.

"Normally, that would have been a good reason. But right now… to be honest, Sunless, I am starting to wonder if it's worth the effort…"

Sunny lingered for a bit, then raised an eyebrow.

"...Pretty please?"

The Prince of Nothing laughed.

"Not good enough."

Sunny stared at him, slowly circulating what little essence he had left through his body. His Shadows were damaged and restoring themselves in the nurturing black flames of his soul… his strength was depleted… his allies were far away and in even worse shape than him.

Things were looking bleak.

He sighed, and then said in a neutral tone:

"Look… sure, you can probably kill me. But make no mistake, I won't make it easy for you. More importantly, I'll make sure to resist for a long, long time."

Mordret smiled politely.

"...So far, I am liking everything that I am hearing."

Sunny grinned.

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

The Prince of Nothing lingered for a moment, then frowned.

"And what might that be?"

Climbing back onto his chair, Sunny leaned on the backrest and let out a relieved sigh. Then, he pointed at the Ivory Tower:

"This Nightmare is coming to the end. There's not much time left until we are returned to the real world. Precious time that you are going to waste trying to get rid of me."

Mordret looked at him with a dark expression.

"That is alright. My schedule is suddenly free, anyway. What else is there to do?"

Sunny shook his head.

"You might have lost the opportunity to kill the Demon of Desire. But have you forgotten about the Demon of Destiny? There is a whole Ebony Tower beneath us, free for the plunder."

The old man's frown deepened.

"The divine flames are much more intense and plentiful during this time. The rift in them can't be traversed by the likes of us. Not that there's enough time to, anyway. Unless…"

His expression suddenly changed.

Sunny nodded.

"Indeed. The Sky Below cannot be traversed, but we just happen to be near the Ivory Island, and the portal that stands behind the Tower. Now… you can waste time trying to kill me… or you can try to pour

enough divine flame into it, and get your hands on all the toys left behind by Nether. Just don't be an idiot like me and let the time catch up to them after the seal is broken…"

Mordret stared at him for a few moments, and then grinned.

"You are just hoping that the strange rot inside the Ebony Tower is going to devour me, aren't you? After all, it is not as starved yet, in this time."

Sunny coughed.

"Uh… guilty as charged. Still. Are you planning to kill a Sovereign without taking a risk from time to time? Hurry up and decide. The clock is ticking."

The old man studied him for a while, not saying anything.

Gradually, Sunny grew extremely uncomfortable under that gaze.

'Damned bastard… your desire to kill me can't be stronger than your desire to take revenge on clan Valor! Hope, do your thing! Come on!'

Eventually, Mordret chuckled, shook his head, and said:

"Two Sovereigns."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

The old man turned around and headed to the edge of the island, followed by his Reflection.

"Two Sovereigns! I plan to kill Asterion, too. Although that will probably be much, much harder than dealing with my father… still, I am as good at remembering grudges as you are, Sunless… so pray that we never meet again."

He stopped near the very edge of the empty abyss of the Sky Below, lingered at it for a few moments, and then said somberly:

"Although who will hear your prayers? The gods are dead…"

With that, the Prince of Nothing stepped into the darkness and disappeared, taking his Reflection with him.

Sunny was left alone on the empty island, struggling to believe that he actually survived.

He looked down, at his exquisite wooden chair, then at the rock in his hand.

Then, he let out a shaky breath.

'Damn. I can't believe that worked…'

# Chapter-741: Chain Breaker

For a few moments, Sunny remained motionless, staring at the beautiful ivory walls of the great pagoda that towered above the world. Although the whole city was being consumed by immolating flame, here at its precipice, everything was calm and quiet.

He couldn't quite believe it.

Solvane, the Saint of War, was dead. The immortal prince encased in the mountain of moving steel was dead. The noble dragon that had dutifully guarded the tower was dead, as well.

They won. The Nightmare… was conquered.

More or less.

From the blood-soaked arena of the Red Colosseum, to the neverending prison of nightmares, to the numinous Temple of the Chalice, to the furious battle for the sky above the Ivory City, to confronting the Prince of Nothing… somehow, he had lived through all of it, and triumphed.

What were the chances of that?

'Just five months... but it felt like a lifetime.'

Of course, there were a few issues left.

Most of the army of the perished Chain Lords was still intact, and on its way to the city. The cohort had dealt a terrible blow to the small part of it, but hundreds upon hundreds of flying ships still remained, carrying thousands upon thousands of soldiers. Now that their commanders were dead, he was not sure what would happen to them, and how they would react.

Noctis was nowhere to be found.

And Hope was still chained, even if not for long now.

With a sigh, Sunny stood up and grimaced as a feeling of sickening weakness overwhelmed him. His soul was terribly damaged… he had never abused it to this degree before, not even during the siege of the Crimson Spire. His body was not doing too great, either. Sunny had given his all to come this far, and now, he was at the end of his rope.

But he was also so close to becoming a Master.

Slowly walking to the edge of the island, he looked into the darkness of the Sky Below for a few moments, summoned the Dark Wing, and then glided down to the last remaining chain holding the Ivory Island in place.

There was not enough essence left in his soul to turn into a swift shadow, and he was too tired to run, so Sunny simply walked forward, using his enchanted cloak to scale the uneven links of the heavenly chain from time to time. It took him a while to traverse the wide chasm of emptiness and climb to the surface of the familiar tranquil island.

The emerald meadow, the calm surface of a clear lake, the peaceful grove of ancient trees… he had been here before, in the distant future. Of course, now, the island did not look exactly the same. There were pools of dragon blood sizzling in the green grass, and wisps of smoke floating in the air, brought over from the burning city by the wind.

He looked at the Ivory Tower and saw the body of a beautiful white dragon wrapped around it, not yet reduced to weathered bones.

Sunny remained motionless for a bit, and then went to find Kai.

The young man was laying on the grass not too far away, unconscious. His armor had melted and disintegrated, and his bark-like skin seemed damaged and scorched. Many of his bones were broken, and his disfigured face was contorted by a grimace of pain.

But he was alive.

After checking on his friend, Sunny came to the conclusion that Kai's life was not in danger. His wounds, while serious, were not enough to kill an Awakened. At least not in a short time…

Not knowing what else to do, Sunny summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud, rolled it, and placed the soft fabric under the archer's head as a pillow. Then, he lingered for a few moments, patted Kai on the shoulder, and stood up.

Then, he slowly walked forward and stood in front of the dead dragon's head, looking at the closed gates behind it.

This was it.

The prison of Hope…

As he studied the gates, something suddenly rustled behind him. Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, and then slowly turned around. His eyes were dark and hollow.

...Noctis did not look as bad as he had after the battle with Solvane, but he also did not look good. The sorcerer was battered and beaten, his body covered by terrible burns. His elegant garments had turned into rags, and his raven-black hair was singed and uneven.

He also looked… different.

It was as though the burden of madness that had clouded his beautiful grey eyes finally disappeared, leaving them sparkling and clear. The sorcerer looked radiant and at ease, emanating a cool and calming aura. His friendly presence enveloped Sunny like an embrace.

Perhaps this was how he had been centuries ago, before the duty of being a shackle to Desire turned him twisted and weighed down by the curse of eternal servitude.

Noctis glanced up, at the ivory expanse of the great pagoda, and then looked at Sunny with a smile:

"Ah, Sunless! Please excuse my disheveled appearance. Looks… looks like we've won, doesn't it?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then offered him a silent nod.

After that, he faced the sorcerer and asked:

"So. What now? This is it? We are done?"

Noctis remained silent for a bit, then lightly shook his head.

"Well… actually, there is one small thing left to do."

A crooked smile appeared on Sunny's face, and he looked away, hiding his eyes from the sorcerer. His voice resounded from the Extraordinary Rock, tinged with a bitter emotion:

"...I thought you said that she can break one chain on her own."

Noctis smiled.

"Oh, I think that she can. However…"

The immortal's smile paled and then disappeared, leaving his face strangely bare.

"...That doesn't mean that she should."

He sighed, and then looked away, at the pillars of smoke rising above the dying city. His gaze was distant and solemn.

"Have you ever seen a wolf gnaw its paw off to escape a trap, Sunless? Ah… it's a terrible thing to behold. I wouldn't wish such a fate on anyone."

Noctis remained silent for a while, and then added in a wistful tone:

"Wolves... are meant to be free."

Then, a carefree smile appeared on his beautiful face once again, and the sorcerer turned to Sunny with sparks dancing in his grey eyes.

"So, my friend… the time has finally come for me to request something of you."

He reached out with his hand and opened his palm. Sunny remained

silent, refusing to look in the sorcerer's direction.

"Will you give me the Obsidian Knife?"

'Goddammit!'

Sunny wanted to say so much. He wanted to do so much. He felt so much…

But he knew that it would have been a wrong and cruel thing to do.

A betrayal.

He sighed heavily, and then faced Noctis. A swirl of sparks appeared around his hand.

"I have never seen a real wolf, you know? And yes, I will… since you asked nicely…"

He opened the lid of the Covetous Coffer, rummaged inside, and then placed the knife cut from a single piece of obsidian in the sorcerer's hand.

Noctis received it and then calmly looked at the black blade. His fingers slowly closed around the handle.

A sad smile appeared on his face.

"Well, then… I guess this is a goodbye. Farewell, Sunless. You have been a great friend to me. And I… I hope that I have been a good friend to you, too."

He sighed, lingered for a few moments, and then added:

"Before we part, however, I must tell you something."

Sunny looked at him darkly and asked in a hoarse voice:

"What?"

Noctis silently shook his head.

"You... you really should stop wearing all black. What a terribly drab

color! Ah, Sunless… you are better than this…"

With that, the sorcerer laughed and took a step forward.

He hesitated for a second, then locked Sunny in a hug. Because of the difference in their heights, Sunny had to bend down a little.

Noctis chuckled, then grew silent for a moment.

Then, he sighed and whispered, his voice suddenly low and somber.

Just four words, each carrying immeasurable weight:

"Never trust the gods."

Then, the sorcerer let go of Sunny, smiled one last time, and walked away.

Soon, he disappeared from sight.

And not too long after that, the Ivory Island trembled slightly as the last chain holding it in place broke apart.

Sunny gritted his teeth, then looked away and wiped his eyes.

His shoulders fell.

"Damn scoundrel… you tricked me again…"

# Chapter-742: Hope

Sunny stood motionless for a while, feeling the ground move beneath him. Now that all seven of the chains were broken and the Ivory Tower became completely untethered from the rest of the Kingdom of Hope, it started to ascend. Slowly at first, and then faster and faster, the island it stood upon soared into the sky, leaving the shattered land behind.

And as it did, Sunny felt the Nightmare coming to the end.

Slowly, he walked to the edge and looked down, at the burning city below.

The beautiful buildings of white stone were melting. The aerial bridges and elegant aqueducts were collapsing, unable to withstand the terrible heat. The streams of clear water were turning into scalding steam. All around, he could see nothing but an ocean of flame.

The wind brought with it the distant sound of human cries, smoke, and the smell of burning flesh.

Thousands of people — those who still lived — were drowning in the fiery ocean, turning into piles of blackened bones and ash.

The Ivory City was dying.

Was this what salvation looked like?

…In the thousands of years to come, the scorched islands were going to crumble into the Sky Below one after another, forming the Tear. The Twisted Rock would eventually be the last one to fall.

As the Ivory Tower rose higher and higher, the sight of the dying city did not encompass all of Sunny's vision anymore. Now, he saw

further and wider. The landscape of the Kingdom of Hope was laid bare in front of him.

He saw the shape of a giant steel corpse swinging below a faraway island on a broken chain, and a shape of a shattered ship laying on the ground. Effie and Cassie were somewhere there, as well… but the distance was too great for Sunny to see them.

He saw countless islands, some of them verdant and green, some of them grey and desolate. There were forests and lakes, rivers and hills, human settlements… small and large. He saw people, cattle, beasts, and Nightmare Creatures.

He saw the chains stretching into the distance as they connected the islands together.

Looking up from the ground, Sunny saw numerous flying ships rushing toward the burning city. There were hundreds and hundred of them, some with white sails, some with red. The army of the fallen Chain Lords had arrived.

As the Ivory Island rose even higher, the sky around it started to change.

The change was subtle at the beginning, but as the Ivory Tower continued to ascend, it became more and more pronounced.

The invisible power that held the flying islands above the abyss of the Sky Below was shifting. As its heart climbed higher and higher, it was slowly becoming more and more overbearing. The giant enchantment was losing its balance.

Sunny shivered as he realized what was happening.

The Crushing… the Crushing was coming to the Chained Isles for the first time.

As he watched, it descended upon the shattered remains of the Kingdom of Hope in all its vicious might.

Across numerous islands, dust suddenly rose into the air. Ancient forests were flattened in an instant, tall hills broke apart, rivers

boiled and changed their course, settlements were turned into ruins.

Countless humans, beasts, and Nightmare Creatures were cruelly killed, not knowing what had killed them.

The flying ships were hit the hardest, every one of them instantly turning into a cloud of splinters, debris, and broken bodies. The mighty army was gone in a second.

The scale of the destruction was too large to comprehend.

Sunny watched as the Kingdom of Hope was turned into the Chained Isles, paralyzed by the inconceivable horror of that sight. For a while, all thoughts disappeared from his head…

Then, suddenly, his eyes widened.

'Cassie! Effie!'

For a moment, he was consumed by fear, but then his hearts slowly calmed.

No... they were alright.

Cassie had always been good at predicting when the islands would enter the Crushing, back in the future. She would have warned Effie if they were in danger and taken them both to safety.

Sunny sighed with relief. Now that his paralysis was broken, however, another thought suddenly entered his mind.

He took an uncertain step back from the edge, then turned around and ran to the center of the island.

Approaching the dead dragon, he hurriedly climbed over the beast's massive head and jumped down, landing near the gates of the Ivory Tower.

The ancient doors were closed shut, as if no one had opened them in a thousand years. Sunny gritted his teeth and pulled, putting the strength of all his shadows into it.

Hope… he had to see Hope!

Succumbing to the pressure, the gates slowly moved. Torturously slowly, one side of them slid forward, creating an opening.

Not wasting any more time, he pushed himself into the narrow gap and entered the Ivory Tower.

Soon, he saw the familiar great hall, its vast expanse bathed in light that streamed through tall windows. Seven chains sprawled from the pristine white floor, as if growing out of it, each ending in a broken shackle. The shackles were bleak and marred, their metal torn.

There was fresh blood on the broken shackles, suffused with a radiant golden glow.

And between them…

Sunny staggered and involuntarily fell to his knees.

Every passion, every desire, every emotion dwelling in his heart suddenly surged forward and ignited, breaking out of control.

In the center of the great hall, surrounded by a swirling hurricane of light and darkness, a vague and graceful silhouette towered above the broken chains. He couldn't quite tell where the light ended, and where her numinous body began… perhaps Hope had no body at all, and was instead made of pure radiance, pure darkness.

He felt as if her nebulous visage was almost human-like, but also inexplicably alien. The shapes and contours were both correct and wrong… both familiar and strange… both pleasing and revolting.

And beautiful…. so beautiful…

She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

She was the most terrifying thing he had ever seen.

She was…

Divine, unholy, unknown, unknowable.

…A daemon.

And she was leaving.

Sunny couldn't see much, but he clearly understood that Hope was ready to disappear. Maybe she was already half-gone, and all he saw was an afterimage.

And yet, he had to… he had to…

His mind was scattered and empty, and he didn't quite remember what he wanted to do.

What he desired…

Sunny gritted his teeth, and then screamed, letting his desire dictate the question:

"Wait! Don't go! Tell me… tell me why the Lord of Light did this! Why did the gods imprison you?! Why couldn't they just kill you?! Why?!"

The Demon of Desire paid him no attention. For a moment, Sunny thought that he would not receive an answer.

But then, something changed.

Hope moved, and was suddenly beside him. Her face, which was weaved of light and darkness, encompassed the whole world. Her radiant eyes peered into the deepest, most hidden parts of his soul.

And then, a voice that sounded like the rustle of countless leaves, like a myriad of prayers, like the wind that blew between the stars whispered into his ear:

"...Because we are their Flaw."

Sunny's eyes grew wide.

And then, everything became dark.

...The Nightmare was over.

# Chapter-743: Appraisal

[Your nightmare is over.]

[Prepare for appraisal…]

Once again, Sunny found himself in the space between dream and reality. The boundless black void was illuminated by a myriad of stars, with countless strings of silver light connecting them together to form an infinite, beautiful pattern.

Now that he had a nascent understanding of sorcery, Sunny saw the pattern differently. His old suspicions grew stronger, slowly turning into a certainty.

This was the inner sanctum of the Spell. And if the Spell had been created by Weaver… then what he was looking at was its weave.

The myriad of stars were the nexuses. The strings of light, however, were not the same as the threads of essence he could create himself.

…Instead, the Spell was weaved from the Strings of Fate itself.

As that realization took root in his heart, Sunny shuddered. The scale of the cosmic weave of silver light and numerous stars that surrounded him had already been too vast to comprehend. Now that he glimpsed its true nature, it suddenly seemed even more inconceivable.

Yes, Weaver was called the Demon of Fate… but harvesting its very fabric to create a titanic enchantment was too incredible, even for the firstborn of the Unknown.

For a daemon…

Sunny shivered once again.

"We are their Flaw… what did she mean?"

Hope's answer had shaken him to the very core. The implications were too… unthinkable. He did not truly understand what she had meant, but felt as though he was at the precipice of a vast and terrible truth.

Sunny was still far away from grasping that truth, however.

Were the daemons personifications of the Flaws that the gods had shed? Is that how the gods had become flawless? Or had the gods been flawless before the daemons appeared, instead?

None of it made any sense. How did the Unknown, from whom the daemons had come, fit into this? Was there a hint at who or what the Unknown had been… or was?

As always, there were too many questions, and almost no answers!

If there was one thing that became clear, however, it was that the relationship between the gods and the daemons was even more complicated than he had thought.

"How infuriating…"

Sunny had learned a remarkable secret, but had no way to understand it. He stared into the distance for some time, then sighed.

"Well, whatever. I am too small and weak to concern myself with the secrets of the divine, anyway."

…Although he was not as small and weak as he had been before.

He was a Master!

Or rather, was about to become one.

As if answering his thoughts, the Spell finally spoke:

[Awakened! Your trial is over.]

Its voice continued to resonate in the black void:

[A lonesome shadow came to a land of shattered dreams. It was captured and thrown into a cage, but escaped by weaving sorceries from its own soul. The shadow beheaded itself to take the slave collar off its neck, and lost its heart to win its freedom.

Leaving the coliseum behind, the shadow traveled far and got ensnared. It lived a hundred lives and died a hundred deaths within a dreadful nightmare, forgetting what it was and where it came from. The shadow did not break, and so, the nightmare broke instead.

Free once again, the shadow befriended a mad sorcerer, a feral child, a crippled archer, and a blind prophet. Together, they collected the deaths of the immortal lords and waged a war against the holy city.

The lords were killed, the city was destroyed.

The shadow broke the chains of Hope, and set Desire free.]

[You have slain an Awakened…]

The Spell went on to list everyone and everything he had killed inside the Nightmare. Sunny felt that something strange was happening to time inside the black void, because it did not take too long for the Spell to finish with that part of the appraisal.

And there was a lot for it to list… Sunny had been busy in these past five months, after all. He had lost count at some point, but the number of his victims had to be somewhere between one and two thousand. He had slain a thousand enemies at the Red Colosseum alone…

A few of them stood out from the litany of names.

The Red Priest, Nightmare, the three War Maidens, a few high-ranking officers of the flying fleet, Solvane herself... that was the tally of his deeds. The Spell was not shy about showering him with praise, either.

Of course, his most dangerous battle had been the battle of wits against Mordret.

After a while, the Spell was ready to pass a verdict.

[...You have set free a demoness chained by a god.]

[Your achievements are remarkable!]

[Final appraisal: excellent.]

With that, it grew silent.

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then frowned.

"Wait… what?"

Excellent? Just excellent?

"What the hell, Spell?!"

It did not even bother to add a remark after the appraisal. He had killed hundreds upon hundreds of Awakened humans and Nightmare Creatures, including plenty of Fallen abominations and Masters! He had even killed a Saint!

He had learned true sorcery, won a battle against a whole army, caused the deaths of several immortals, and set free a daemon against a god's will! He had his head cut off and his heart ripped out, and still lived to tell the tale! Was it not enough to earn a better mark?

Not that it mattered, anyway… unlike the First Nightmare, the Second did not come with an additional boon. Sunny already had a True Name and an Aspect Legacy. All he was going to receive was the Ascension, which was the only reward he truly cared about.

But still…

Why was his performance in the First Nightmare appraised as glorious, but his performance in the Second Nightmare as just excellent? Both achievements seemed equally improbable, but this one was without a doubt much more impressive.

Suddenly, an idea entered his mind.

Sunny's eyes widened.

"Can… can this be true?"

If it was…

His heart suddenly skipped a bit.

What was the difference between what he had done in his two Nightmares?

Yes, his deeds in the Kingdom of Hope were astonishing and bordering on impossible. But almost all of them repeated the events of the original past. They had followed the current of fate…

The Temple of the Chalice had been destroyed, Sun Prince had lost his arm and ended up with his chest torn open, hanging from the Shipwreck Island with his leg tangled in a broken chain. Lord Sevras died wrapping his dragon body around the Ivory Tower.

The only substantial change he had achieved was killing Solvane instead of letting her suffer for an eternity in the grasp of Wormvine.

In the First Nightmare, however… Sunny was not sure how the true temple slave fared, but he suspected that their paths diverged quite a lot.

In other words, he had carved his own path through the Black Mountain, overcoming the current of fate to a much larger degree.

But what did all of this mean?

Sunny forgot to breathe.

…Was that what the Spell truly valued?

Was that what its true purpose was?

Had Weaver created it…

To change fate?

# Chapter-744: Ascension

Sunny reeled from all the information he was receiving.

He had already been exhausted after the battle against the flying armada, the race across the burning city, the confrontation with Mordret… and the rest.

Witnessing Hope in her true form and hearing her inhuman, beautiful voice had almost overloaded his mind. Looking at the Spell through the prism of his new knowledge of sorcery had been another shock.

And this latest revelation…

Sunny groaned.

'What does it all mean?'

Of course, he could not be certain of the validity of his guess. But his intuition told him that he was at least partially right… the appraisal of the challenger's performance did not depend on the greatness of the feats they had achieved, but instead on how far they had strayed from the predestined outcome. How well they had resisted the current of fate.

The Spell wanted humans to strain against the chains of fate… maybe even break them.

But why? Why would the Demon of Fate want fate to be subjugated? By mere mortals, no less.

And what was the point of manipulating fate inside illusory Nightmares? No matter how much was changed, it was never going to affect the Dream Realm and the Waking World. It was never going to reach reality. Whatever changes had been made, they were going to disappear forever as soon as the Nightmare ended.

As far as Sunny knew, no echo of the events that transpired in the First, Second, and Third Nightmares had ever affected change in the real world. The only thing that returned from the Nightmares…

Were the Awakened.

He frowned, feeling a vague hint of suspicion appearing in his mind. However, before he could grasp it, the Spell spoke again. Its voice resounded in the darkness, enveloping him from all directions:

[The Third Seal is broken.]

[Awakening dormant powers…]

Sunny was about to Ascend.

Just as before, he felt as though something was waking up inside him. His four Shadow Cores ignited with intense heat, the power within them surging. The heat spread through his soul and his body, rejuvenating and changing them.

The feeling was familiar and euphoric. He felt his body being reforged into a stronger, better, more perfect version of itself. His soul was going through the same sublime transformation.

This process was already familiar to Sunny, since more or less the same thing had happened to him twice before. However, this time… something was different…

Instead of stopping after reaching the threshold of qualitative change and immense fortification, the transformation continued. His body and soul, both turned incandescent and malleable by the furious heat flowing through them, started to melt into each other.

They were slowly merging.

But they were not simply joining into a single whole… instead, the two parts of his being resonated with each other, reinforcing one another. The power of that resonance grew stronger and stronger, and then exploded once it reached his four cores.

Under the influence of the resonance, the threshold was demolished,

pushing him even further on the path of evolution. And as his body and soul became one…

A profound change took place.

Suddenly, Sunny felt the shadow essence coursing through every fiber of his being with stark clarity. The difference was so staggering that he almost yelped. The measure of control he could exert on his essence became incredibly precise and fine.

Additionally, since his body and soul were now deeply interconnected, the effect of one on another also went through a fundamental change. He could do much more, and with much less.

This was the true boon of the Ascension.

And there was something else… a deep and vast shift in his very being that he could feel, but not understand or express with words yet. All Sunny knew was that it had to do with his relation to the waking world, the Dream Realm, and his connection to both.

Slowly, the heat suffusing his newly reforged self subsided and turned into a pleasant coldness. The coldness then disappeared, absorbed into his spirit, his flesh, and his bones.

Sunny looked at the black void with new eyes.

He felt…

Powerful.

He felt as though there was furious might boiling under his skin. He also felt calm and confident. Balanced.

As he listened to his body, the Spell spoke from the darkness:

[Awakening Aspect Ability.]

[Aspect Ability acquired.]

Sunny held his breath.

[...Aspect Ability Name: Shadow Manifestation.]

He clenched his fists.

'Is this… is this what I think it is?!'

However… to his surprise, the Spell was not done speaking.

Stunning Sunny, its voice resounded once again:

[Your Attribute has evolved.]

[Your Aspect Ability has evolved.]

The Spell paused for a moment, and then added solemnly:

[Your Ascension is complete.]

Sunny opened his eyes wide.

'What?! What has evolved?!'

He hurriedly summoned the runes and read them:

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Ascended.

Class: Devil.

Shadow Cores: [4/7].

Shadow Fragments: [744/4000].

Sunny stared at the number of his fragments for a moment, then shook his head and skipped ahead to his Attributes.

Attributes: [Fated], [Flame of Divinity]...

He had expected the [Flame of Divinity] to transform once again, but it was the same. Neither did [Blood Weave] and [Bone Weave]

change.

Instead… [Child of Shadows] was gone.

A new Attribute had replaced it.

Sunny stared at the runes.

They read:

[Master of Shadows].

'...What?'

He sucked in a deep breath, waited for a moment, and then concentrated on the shimmering symbols.

[Master of Shadows] Attribute Description: "Shadows recognize you as one of their champions."

The first part was the same, but the second was new.

'Wait… does this mean that I command wild shadows now?'

He quickly concentrated on his Abilities, looking for the one that had evolved.

It was [Shadow Control].

Now, its description read:

[Shadow Control] Ability Description: "[Your shadows are more independent than most, and are invaluable helpers. All shadows respect your authority.]

'It does!'

The possibilities! If he could command natural shadows to move and change shapes according to his will, so many things would become easier. So many things would become possible!

And that new and unexpected gift was going to, without a doubt, synergize not only with his familiar Aspect Abilities, but with his new

one, as well.

Finally, Sunny moved his gaze and concentrated on his Ascended Ability.

The runes shimmered in the darkness.

Aspect Ability: [Shadow Manifestation].

Ability Description: [You can manifest shadows as tangible objects].

Sunny read the description several times over, then froze for a few moments.

The visage of the Mountain King being torn apart by tentacles made of pure shadows appeared in his mind.

…After some time, Sunny threw his head back and let out a loud, triumphant laugh.

As his laughter echoed in the darkness, the Spell whispered into his ear.

[...Wake up, Sunless.]

[Your nightmare is over!]

# Chapter-745: Freedom of Choice

In a dark underground chamber, a metal sarcophagus stood shrouded in silence. Nothing had disturbed the silence and no light had penetrated the darkness in a long, long time.

Until now.

Suddenly, the sarcophagus came to life, and a scattering of lights ignited on its surface. A crack appeared on the smooth alloy surface, revealing where the edges of a heavy lid were. The lid smoothly slid away, and a flood of radiant light chased away the darkness of the underground chamber.

Cold vapor shined as it rose from inside the sarcophagus. Then, a pale hand rose from within it and forcefully grabbed the metal lip, easily bending its armored alloy.

Sunny struggled to climb out of the sleeping pod for a few moments, then lowered his feet to the cool plates of the dojo's floor. A moment later, he swayed and fell down with a yelp.

"Damnation!"

Sunny remained sprawled on the floor for a few seconds, trying to understand what had happened and why he suddenly lost balance. Then, his eyes gleamed.

"Wait… I can speak again? I can speak again!"

A happy smile slowly appeared on his lips.

Of course… he was back to being a human! He had returned to his own body. Trying to move like a towering demon was not going to do his sense of balance any good…

With a mad grin, Sunny nimbly jumped to his feet and looked down, enjoying the sight of his slender, pale body. Then, he suddenly spun and performed several lightning-fast strikes and kicks.

"Ah, it is good to be home!"

He felt so light, so swift, so agile… but most of all, so himself. It was as though a giant weight fell from his shoulders, quite literally — the shadowspawn must have weighed three times what Sunny weighed. Being a tall, powerful devil had its own advantages, but he much preferred his true compact self.

Not only was Sunny much lighter, but he also presented a much smaller target for the enemies to stick their blades in. And although having only two hands seemed rather inconvenient and silly, shedding the cumbersome shell of the inhuman creature felt nothing short of exhilarating.

Besides, now that Sunny was a Master, his slender body packed more punch than the shadowspawn could ever hope to muster. Not to mention how in tune it was with shadow essence now, and how explosive the result could be.

At the moment, Sunny was incredibly happy with his natural stature and height. Only after being forcefully turned into a lumbering monstrosity did he learn to appreciate all the benefits of being light, nimble, and swift.

Inhaling the flawlessly filtered air of the underground dojo, he let out a satisfied sigh and glanced at the crumpled metal of the lip of the sleeping pod. He had inadvertently damaged the armored alloy by simply grabbing it too hard. Getting used to his new strength was going to take some time…

For a moment, Sunny felt very disheartened about the damage he had done to the expensive machine. Replacing the bent panel was not going to be cheap. It was well within his means, of course… but still…

However, then, he tilted his head slightly.

"Wait… why do I even care?"

Why would he worry about the luxurious sleeping pod?

He didn't need it anymore!

He was a Master now… a true Ascended. If Sunny wished to enter the Dream Realm, he would travel there physically. His body would not be left empty and defenseless in the waking world. More than that…

He could leave the Dream Realm behind, forever. If he wanted to, he could never go back to that hell. He could just remain in the comfort and safety of the real world, enjoying all that it offered thanks to his wealth, citizenship, and social status.

For the first time after becoming infected by the Nightmare Spell, Sunny was free to refuse it. He had won his right to have a choice. He… he was not a slave to the whims of the world anymore.

For now…

He could concentrate on his business and open a true Memory shop, just like he had wanted. With his accumulated arsenal and knowledge of sorcery, creating a thriving enterprise would not be a problem. Sunny would be able to grow filthy rich and enjoy a lavish or even decadent lifestyle without having to risk his life or think about how to sustain it ever again.

He could even sleep in an actual bed, and see actual dreams.

Would it not be a beautifully happy ending for a homeless street rat from the outskirts?

Sunny froze, staring into the distance. Slowly, a pale smile appeared on his face.

"Yeah… as if that would ever happen…"

Somehow, he doubted that extricating himself from the Spell would be that easy. Even if he learned how to manage the unpredictable nature of his [Fated] Attribute, there were other factors to consider.

As a Master with a Special Strategic Asset designation, he was bound to attract the utmost attention of the forces that governed humanity. Neither the government nor the Great Clans would leave him be… especially the latter. Sunny suspected that he was going to receive a friendly visit from a representative of one of the ruling clans in the near future.

Thanks to subtle assistance from Master Jet, they had largely let him be when Sunny had been simply a promising Awakened. Now that he proved his mettle and elevated himself to the venerated status of an Ascended, the clans would not remain idle.

At the very least, they had to pass on a message that trying to become a Saint without pledging allegiance to one of them would not be tolerated.

And then there was the whole mess with the Night Temple…

Saint Tyris had said that she would smooth things out with clan Valor, but Sunny did not know how successful her attempts to shield him from the consequences of Mordret's escape had ended up being. Even though there were no witnesses left to tell the tale of what had transpired in the destroyed Citadel, he was hesitant to assume that a Great Clan had no means of finding out the truth.

And finally…

There was Nephis.

Even though Sunny was inclined to believe that Changing Star would not abuse her power over him, he could not be absolutely sure.

Worse still, whatever certainty he had was based on Nephis he knew.

Who could tell what years of solitude in the harrowing hell of the Dream Realm had done to her mind?

Sunny looked down, and then sighed.

"No… I'll still be rich and lazy one day, no matter what… you will all see!"

His train of thought was interrupted, however, because in the next moment, the whole home suddenly shook, and a strangely exhilarated howl resounded from somewhere above.

Sunny flinched, then looked up with wide eyes.

"What... the hell was that?!"

# Chapter-746: First Steps

Summoning the Undying Chain and the Cruel Sight, Sunny bypassed using either the elevator or the stairs, and stepped through the shadows to leave the underground dojo behind.

No matter what kind of an abomination had found its way into his home, the creature was going to regret it dearly!

For a moment, however, Sunny felt a hint of hesitation.

…He did not know what had transpired in the waking world during his absence, after all. He had left for the Night Temple seven months ago, and had not been back since.

For all Sunny knew, humanity might have fallen in that time! The whole city could have been destroyed, with endless hordes of Nightmare Creatures stalking the desolate ruins. Any kind of horror could have been hiding in his living room…

'Well, so what? It is still my living room…'

No matter what state the waking world was in, anyone and anything thinking that they could simply make themselves at home in a home that belonged to Sunny would have to reconsider their life choices.

Ready for battle, he appeared from the shadows… and froze.

The exhilarated howl grew much louder above ground, but it was not produced by a Nightmare Creature.

Instead, it was produced by Effie.

With beads of condensation still glistening on her olive skin, the huntress was standing in the center of the room and howling like a maniac. Behind her, the door of the guest bedroom was taken off the

hinges… complete with a large piece of the wall and a chunk of the ceiling.

'That wall was reinforced with armored alloy, dammit!'

Sunny stared at his friend in shock, then slowly blinked.

'Wait… Effie… is standing?!'

Indeed, the young woman was standing tall, her long legs appearing healthy and strong. There was no wheelchair in sight.

In fact, her whole appearance had changed. The weak, unhealthy girl with pale skin stretching over brittle bones and a twisted spine was gone. Instead, Effie looked almost like she did in the Dream Realm — tall, attractive, with sparkling hazel eyes and perfectly defined, lean muscles rolling under the dewy olive skin. She was radiating an infectious feeling of vitality and vigor.

Everything about her was screaming of strength, potency, and power. The only thing that changed was the length and cut of her hair, as well as the degree of her tan.

Before Sunny could realize it, a joyous smile crept up on his face.

…Of course. The Ascension was a miraculous process. It merged the physical and the spirit bodies together, taking the best parts and perfecting both. Even the Lost could return from the Dream Realm and live in the real world once more after conquering the Second Nightmare. Effie's disability was no exception to this magical rule.

That was the reason why she had always strived to become a Master, to begin with.

…A moment later, Effie ended her triumphant howl on a high note and turned around, finally noticing him. Her eyes shined. She took a step forward and grinned brightly:

"Doofus! I'm walking!"

Sunny wanted to say something, but then forced himself to look away. He cleared his throat.

"Congratulations! I am very happy for you… I am. But, please… can you put something on?"

Effie blinked a couple of times, then looked down. In all the excitement, she had completely forgotten to dress after climbing out of the sleeping pod.

Her grin turned a little sheepish.

"Ah… well… pretend you didn't see anything!"

Hearing the young woman hurriedly stomp away, Sunny let out a heavy sigh.

"I will… try…"

Effie's voice resounded from the guest bedroom:

"Sunny!"

He turned his head slightly.

"What?"

For a moment, there was silence.

"...Sorry about the doors! And the walls!"

Sunny grimaced.

"It's not a big… wait, walls? As in multiple walls?! What… what the hell did you do?!"

***

While Effie was clothing herself, Sunny looked around his house. It didn't change much.

In the seven months that passed since his departure, the cleaning systems had done a good job of keeping everything presentable. If not for the broken door of the guest bedroom and the debris of the collapsed wall laying on the floor, he could have thought that he had left only yesterday.

It was a strange feeling… so much had happened, so much had changed. He had changed most of all. He was a Master now, and that was perhaps not the greatest transformation Sunny had gone through after living through the Night Temple and the Nightmare.

And yet, here in the waking world, everything was the same. Everything was unchanged.

He did not know how to feel about it.

The permanence and safety of his home were very… comforting. But they also filled him with a deep sense of resentment, for some reason. The contradiction persisted, making him feel confused.

Shaking his head, Sunny retrieved his communicator from where he had left it and turned it online.

There was a backlog of unanswered messages he was going to have to go through, but right now, that did not matter. Only the last message caught his attention.

It was from Cassie, containing only a couple of words:

"I'm fine."

He quickly sent a response, and then dialed Kai.

His friend answered the call immediately, as if he was waiting for it. The charming young man was already dressed, although his gorgeous hair was wet and messy. In the background, multiple people in stylish business suits were feverishly running around with slightly shell-shocked looks on their faces. They were probably the representatives of his agency and PR team.

Kai smiled.

"Sunny! What… what happened? How did the Nightmare end? Is everyone alright?"

Sunny lingered for a moment.

"I am alright. Effie and Cassie are alive and well, too. After you dealt

with Sevirax, everything… everything went smoothly."

The young man sighed with relief.

"Thank the gods. But what about…"

He grew silent, not wishing to say Mordret's name aloud. Then, Kai shook his head:

"Actually, don't answer. I'll be there in ten minutes!"

The image on the screen of the communicator shifted, and then cut off. The last thing Sunny heard was someone's voice yelping:

"Mr. Night? What are you… what do you mean, step away from the window?!"

Sunny lowered the communicator and smiled.

A piece of the broken wall caught his eye, laying on the kitchen table. Everything else was perfectly clean and spotless.

…As Sunny stared at the piece of debris with displeasure, a dark tentacle rose from below, and easily swatted it to the floor.

# Chapter-747: Invisible Scars

Usually, it would have taken Kai a lot longer to fly across the city to reach the tranquil terrace district… not that he would have. But today, the famous idol neglected his habit of staying low and out of sight. It seemed that his speed increased tremendously, as well, because ten minutes later, he was already at Sunny's door.

Maybe because of that, there was no crowd of paparazzi following him.

As they waited for Cassie, Effie rummaged through the empty refrigerator, then walked away from it with a disappointed sigh.

"There's no food!"

Sunny, who was evaluating the damage the boisterous huntress had done to the guest bedroom, glanced at her darkly.

"We've been gone for months. What did you expect?"

Effie made a sad face, then shrugged.

"But I'm hungry!"

Sunny let out an exasperated breath.

"...I have some synthpaste, if you want."

She shuddered and opened her mouth to retort, but at that moment, there was a knock on the door. If not for the haughty shadow standing guard outside — reluctantly, of course, since mundane tasks such as this were grossly beneath it — Sunny would have tensed up.

However, he already knew that it was Cassie.

The blind girl walked inside, froze for a moment, then raised a

deliciously smelling package.

"...I brought food."

Effie threw a quick glance at Kai and grinned:

"See! Someone has some sense…"

She did not stare at the archer for long, though.

Kai had always been ridiculously charming, but after becoming a Master, his looks assumed an almost hypnotizing quality. It was easy to get distracted if one stared at him for too long.

In fact, every one of them became much better looking, albeit to a different degree. After studying Kai and Cassie for a bit, Sunny couldn't help but shake his head ruefully, a stunned expression on his face. He finally understood why Master Jet had called herself average when they first met, at least as far as Ascended went.

Still… it felt wrong to put the word average in one sentence with someone like her. Jet possessed an intangible quality that no one he had ever met was able to match. The four of them were Masters too, now, but they were far away from matching her arresting presence.

And Sunny himself?

He wasn't sure that he qualified to be considered a flower boy, as Soul Reaper had once predicted, but even he couldn't call himself unassuming anymore. The scrawny kid from the outskirts was gone. Instead, a young man with porcelain skin and striking black eyes took his place.

Deep in their darkness, visible only to Sunny himself, golden threads of Weaver's forbidden legacy glowed with the flame of divinity.

…The four of them settled around the table and shared a silent meal.

Despite the fact that they should have been exhilarated by their triumph over the Nightmare, none of the four seemed too joyous… well, except for Effie, who couldn't stop grinning and stealing glances at her pristine, vigorous body. The huntress was overflowing with

giddiness.

The other three, however, just felt… hurt, tired, and empty.

And why wouldn't they be? Inside the Nightmare, there was no time for weakness. They had to carry on no matter how deep the wounds dealt to their souls cut. Now that the danger had passed and the members of the cohort were back in the real world, all those invisible scars were starting to make their presence known.

The slaughterhouse of the Red Colosseum, the nightmares, the assault on the Ivory City… all of it was slowly coming back to haunt Sunny.

The others had their share of demons to quell, no doubt.

After a while, Kai poured himself a cup of tea, looked at Sunny, and asked with uncertainty:

"So… what happened? I don't remember much after being swallowed by Sevirax."

Effie dropped her fork and stared at the archer with a stunned expression.

"Swallowed… what? You were swallowed by the dragon?"

Kai smiled with embarrassment:

"Oh… not really. I just, sort of… jumped into his mouth. Because I didn't know how else to kill him."

The Effie blinked a few times, but didn't say anything. She even forgot about her food for a moment.

Sunny looked down, then sighed.

"Nothing really happened. I managed to stall the… the fifth challenger for a while. He fell for my deception because he had assumed that I would not trust anyone with the knives, I think. After you killed the dragon, there was no real reason for him to stay. He left to salvage at least some rewards before the Nightmare ended, and I crossed to the Ivory Island."

He grew quiet for a few moments, and then added:

"When Sevras died, one of the two remaining chains that held it in place broke. Then… then the other one did, too. The Tower rose into the sky, and as it did, the force holding the islands afloat shifted, creating the Crushing. That is how Chained Isles came to be. Hope escaped, and the Nightmare ended."

A somber silence settled over the table. After a while, Cassie asked:

"So… so Lord Noctis fell, too?"

Sunny slowly nodded.

"Yes. He asked me to give him the Obsidian Knife, and broke the last chain himself."

Effie sighed, then glanced at the cup of tea in front of her.

"Damn it. I wish we had something stronger to drink, in his honor. Some wine, maybe. Noctis, he was a devious, wicked, two-faced lunatic. But he was also… great. In more than one sense.

You know?"

She smiled wistfully, and then shook her head:

"Isn't it strange? Mourning a figment of the Spell. They weren't real, after all."

Sunny looked down, knowing that Effie was not only talking about Noctis.

Then, the corners of his mouth curled upward.

He raised his cup of tea and smiled.

"...Actually, I think that enjoying some tea is what he would have wanted us to do. That was his plan, you know? Win a war against the immortal Saints, defy the gods, release the Demon of Desire from her prison… and then have a cup of tea."

Sunny took a sip, and then let out a satisfied sigh.

"So, let's relax and do exactly that. We deserved this much, at least... don't you think?"

# Chapter-748: Young Masters

Some time later, Sunny left the house and sat on the porch by himself.

His thoughts were in disarray.

So much had changed, so much had happened. So much was going to happen in the next few days, as well. His life was inevitably going to transform… hopefully, for the better.

However, there were many obstacles he was going to have to overcome and many decisions he was going to have to make in order to avoid being destroyed by the changes instead. Although Sunny had grown considerably stronger, and obliterating him was not as easy anymore, there were still threats out there that he did not dare to face.

He sighed, and looked down.

'I am a Master.'

The knowledge rested in his mind, but he was yet to truly comprehend it. Ascended had seemed so distant and glorious to him, once. Not quite demigods, but also not mere mortals anymore. But now, he was one of these venerated beings himself. He could feel inhuman power coursing through his veins.

That was something he couldn't process that fast.

And yet, time waited for no one. Sunny knew that there would be no opportunity to properly get used to his swiftly shifting circumstances. He had a lot to do, and he had to do it now.

'Just take it one step at a time.'

What did he have to do immediately?

Call Aiko, for one. He had to let his business partner know that he was back and get an update on how Rain was doing.

Then, discover a way to contact the White Feather clan and find out about the fallout of the destruction of the Night Temple… although Cassie could handle that.

Finally, get in touch with Master Jet. For better or worse, she was his handler and his point of contact with the government. If things turned from bad to worse with the great clans, the authorities were the only force influential enough to shield him… for a price, no doubt.

Sunny grimaced.

'Not yet… I need to collect my thoughts first.'

He leaned back and studied the familiar, peaceful landscape of the terrace district.

Despite the fact that the Great Clans possessed incredible powers, it was not too easy to deal with Sunny and the other members of the cohort anymore. All four of them were Masters now, and exceptional ones at that… not only had they conquered the Second Nightmare, but they had also done it at an abnormally young age and after entering the Seed one measly year after Awakening.

The survivors of the Forgotten Shore were already famous, and this latest accomplishment was bound to stir up a real storm, both in the media and behind closed doors. Sunny would not be able to remain fully under the radar anymore.

Not to mention that each of them received extremely powerful Abilities.

Effie's was, perhaps, the most remarkable in how useful it was. Sunny had expected the huntress to receive another combat Ability, but instead, her new power appeared to bolster her allies as long as they could see her. It was as though they were receiving a part of her phenomenal, comprehensive physical augmentation.

Sunny had experienced that enhancement himself when Effie enthusiastically activated her new Ability, and had to admit that it was… powerful. Not comparable to what the young woman herself could accomplish, but still significant.

What was even more amazing, it could be effortlessly shared with any number of people as long as they maintained the line of sight with the huntress, without an additional cost in essence. That basically meant that any cohort, any force, and even any army could benefit tremendously from having Effie fight in their ranks.

Of course, Masters usually acted alone. There were simply not enough Masters and too much for them to do to form full cohorts of Ascended. However, that did not mean that one could not build supporting teams of Awakened or even mundane soldiers around them. Sunny had seen exactly that when Master Jet arrived to contain the Gate ahead of the government forces.

So… Effie was about to get very, very popular among the great powers of humanity.

Kai was in a similar situation, although for different reasons.

His Ascended Ability was… strange, and a little bit frightening. None of them, not even Kai himself, had the chance to explore the full range of its capabilities. However, the potential of what it could achieve was vast.

Basically, Kai's voice acquired a supernatural quality that compelled people who heard it to follow his commands. The result and the consequence depended on how much essence he poured into the compulsion and the target's resistance, as well as some other factors that no one understood.

Direct commands were hard to force on people with strong willpower or high resistance to mind attacks. For example, if Kai commanded another Ascended to drop their weapon, they would be able to refuse the compulsion.

…However, their grip might grow weaker, and their attacks might grow slower.

The same principle worked the other way around, too. The compulsion did not have to be aimed at an enemy. Kai could call upon his allies to fight with more fervor or to hold their ground no matter what. He could invoke any feeling he wanted in large groups of people, or lure them to their deaths like a siren.

That Ability made him incredibly valuable for those who held power, as well. The government propaganda machine especially was going to lose its collective mind over Nightingale and his enchanting voice.

And there was more… Kai's Aspect had evolved after he had faced and slain the Ivory Dragon. Instances like that were known to happen, but were also incredibly rare. His Awakened Aspect was now Ascended, which made his previous Abilities more potent, and maybe even introduced new facets to them.

The archer had no time to explore these changes yet, so his friends had no idea what the evolution entailed. They only knew that their friend had grown stronger, although perhaps in a way that few would notice.

And then there was Cassie.

Her new Ability was perhaps the most obscure and esoteric. The blind girl herself described it as being able to perceive the world from a different perspective.

In other words, she could now use someone else — or something else — to substitute her senses. She could smell through someone's nose, feel through someone's touch… and see through someone's eyes.

While Cassie herself was still blind, she was able to look upon the world again, and see what the recipient of the connection saw. The connection could be established with several mediums at the same time, as long as she had the mental capacity to withstand the flood of input.

What was more disturbing was the fact that the medium did not necessarily have to acquiesce to the connection, or even be aware of it — although it took much less essence to sustain a connection with a willing recipient.

Despite not being too flashy at first glance, that was an insidiously formidable Ability. After all, knowledge was the origin of power, and Cassie could potentially become a vortex of it. There were a lot of uses for such an Ability, from becoming the connective tissue between the commanders and the soldiers during a large-scale battle to establishing an invisible and undetectable spy network.

Additionally, Cassie's first Ability expanded once again, now allowing her to perceive not only Attributes and Aspect names, but also Aspect Abilities of other Awakened.

In short, she would be a boon to any clan, great clan, or branch of the government. However, Sunny knew that the blind girl was deadset on remaining independent and continuing to lead the Fire Keepers.

Perhaps she would even get a chance…

In light of all these revelations, his own Ascended Ability, Shadow Manifestation, seemed to have paled in comparison.

…But that was just if one did not look closer.

Sunny suspected that his new Ability was much more versatile, insidious, and powerful than that of the other three.

And speaking of that…

Wasn't it time to get to know it better?

# Chapter-749: Shadow Manifestation

For a while, Sunny silently experimented with his new power.

Shadow Manifestation was an… interesting Ability, especially when combined with the evolved Shadow Control. It was deceptively straightforward, but held so much depth that Sunny wasn't sure that he would be able to figure out all of its potential uses in a short span of time.

The fundamental function of Shadow Manifestation was rather simple — it allowed him to turn shadows tangible.

But the devil hid in the details.

Now that Sunny enjoyed authority over all shadows, and not only his own, he could manipulate their shape and even make them move according to his will. However, that facet of his Aspect had its caveats.

Not all shadows were the same. Some were young, and some were ancient. Some were deep, and some were shallow. Most importantly, some belonged to inanimate objects, and some belonged to living beings.

Although Sunny enjoyed their respect and reverence, that did not mean that all shadows were going to submit to him implicitly. They simply chose to follow his commands due to his status as the Master of Shadows, as opposed to being forced to do it.

That was not new to Sunny. He had already noticed this pattern of behavior when inviting wild shadows to enter the Shadow Lantern. Most did it of their own free will, but some obstinate ones refused his invitation.

Now that the [Child of Shadows] Attribute had evolved, only the most ancient and deep of the wild shadows seemed reluctant to answer his call. However, not all shadows were "wild" — that was a term he decided to use when speaking about those of them that were cast by inanimate objects.

If a shadow was cast by a living being and connected to a living soul, no amount of authority Sunny had could compel it to abandon or betray their source.

So, Shadow Control only allowed him to manipulate wild shadows. The deeper and older a shadow was, the more concentration it took to command it. He also experienced more strain when commanding distant shadows — now that Sunny became an Ascended Devil, the reach of his control extended to almost ten kilometers. His shadow sense, however, did not usually extend quite that far.

His human mind would have been overloaded if it did. So while Sunny could potentially control shadows that were very far away, he simply had no way of sensing them.

…Unless they were his own shadows, of course, or those he perceived through them.

And then came the actual Shadow Manifestation.

Unlike Shadow Control, manifestation required him to expend essence. The shadows would remain tangible as long as he continued to sustain them with essence, and would return to their natural state if he stopped.

This was both a blessing and a curse. For obvious reasons, Sunny would have preferred to keep his essence… however, there was an unexpected and incredible boon to this Ability.

Due to the fact that the manifested shadows were suffused with his essence, they assumed its property. In other words… all of them were akin to Memories of the Ascended Rank in terms of durability and resilience.

This meant that if Sunny shaped a shadow into a blade and

manifested it, the blade would be comparable to an Ascended Memory in terms of both sturdiness and the damage it could do.

But he was not only limited to creating weapons! Shadow Manifestation offered him an incredible measure of utility. Since shadows were formless by nature, he could shape them into anything he wanted. He could create barriers, bridges, ropes, suits of armor… the only limitations were his imagination and his reservoir of essence.

Hell, he could even create a saddle for Nightmare, or an entire house!

Of course, nothing came without a cost. The more complex and condensed a shape was, the more essence it took to sustain it. Creating a simple shadow tentacle was not too hard, but imbuing it with enough solidity to cut through an enemy like a sword was much more taxing.

Manifesting deep and ancient shadows also took a toll, although they were more powerful.

And lastly… all the things he made tangible were able to move on their own, as long as their shape allowed it. A sword was not going to fly on its own, but a manifested shadow could move around and grab his enemies. That was not a very efficient form of attack in most cases, however.

Each shadow possessed its own level of strength, which was usually not too high. Sunny was far away from being able to rip an Awakened Tyrant to shreds… for now.

And unless he really wanted to.

By experimenting a little, he found out that he could enhance the might of the manifested shadows by pouring more essence into them. The more force he wanted to exert above their natural threshold, the more essence he had to burn. That would not have been too powerful in the hands of an average Master…

But Sunny was a Devil. He had vastly more essence than almost any other Master had at their disposal. If he really wanted to, he could exert truly monstrous strength through his manifested shadows. Even

though that would be grossly inefficient in terms of essence expenditure, he felt very happy to have such an option.

Who wouldn't want to rip enemies apart without having to lift a finger? Even if there were many easier and smarter ways to kill something… very few were as cool!

And as devious.

…Apart from the wild shadows, Sunny could also manifest his own. In fact, doing so was much easier, allowed him much better control, and demanded much less essence to be used. For a few moments, he imagined summoning Gloomy, Happy, Creepy, and Haughty, arming them with shadow blades, and making them fight in his stead.

'What a sight that would be!'

However, after thinking for a bit, he decided that this was not a very good idea. There was a very simple reason for that — while tangible shadows could affect the real world, they could be affected in turn. Manifested shadows could damage his enemies, but could also be damaged instead.

Since his shadows were deeply connected to his soul, making them vulnerable to physical attacks was a very stupid thing to do. Sunny did not even want to think about what would happen if one of them was destroyed.

At most, they would be able to perform simple tasks that did not pose any risk.

…Overall, Sunny was very happy with his new Aspect Ability.

It was powerful and versatile, providing him with potent means of both attack and defense, as well as incredible utility.

What made him especially happy, though…

Was how perfectly it synergized with the Shadow Lantern.

Shadow Manifestation had only one apparent weakness — the fact that he would not always be surrounded by shadows. Without

anything to manifest, its worth was almost nonexistent… unless he wanted to risk his own shadows, of course.

However, that weakness was made moot by the Shadow Lantern. With its help, Sunny could carry an infinite amount of shadows with him at all times. No matter where he went, he would never be without their assistance. He would never be a master without servants.

Wherever Sunny went…

A swarm of shadows would follow.

# Chapter-750: Home

Sunny remained on the porch for a while longer, thinking about nothing in particular.

He wondered about the future, and about the past.

What had happened to the real Noctis? What had happened to the real Hope? What had really happened to her cursed kingdom?

He had seen the corpses of Sevras and Sun Prince in the Dream Realm. However, Solvane had still been alive. The Obsidian and the Ivory knives had never been used, hinting that the real events of the liberation of Hope had been both similar and vastly different from how they had transpired in the Nightmare.

Had Noctis succeeded in his ambition to make a deal with Weaver? Had the Demon of Fate helped him find a way to break the eternal shackles of Hope without using the knives?

If so… had the sorcerer, perhaps, survived his mad rebellion?

What price had he paid?

Of course, Sunny knew that there were no answers to his questions. He was never going to learn the truth. The events he had lived through in the Nightmare were too distant, and shrouded in too much mystery for him to discover it.

...As he thought about all these things, a familiar figure suddenly appeared on the crosswalk.

A teenage girl with pale skin and black hair was walking back from school, a somber expression on her face.

Noticing Sunny, she froze for a second, and then suddenly sprinted

over.

Halfway to the porch, Rain remembered herself and slowed down, awkwardly trying to hide her excitement.

She stopped near Sunny, hesitated for a moment, and then hit him on the shoulder with her little fist.

"Where… where the hell have you been? Are you back? You were gone for so long!"

Sunny leaned back and grinned.

"Hey, Rain. Of course, I am back. Can't you see? As for where I was... I just visited a temple. Then, I went on a little cruise.

Then, I visited a couple of towers, spent some time in a theater, befriended a horse, lived in another temple for a while. Finally, I visited a very pretty city and got to know its rulers. Why? Did you miss me?"

Rain stared at him for a few moments, then scoffed.

"Me? Ha! Why would I miss you, of all people?!"

She grew silent, looked down, and then added shyly:

"Well… maybe I did miss you… a tiny bit. My new tutor is a very respectable Awakened, but he is not at all as fun as you."

Sunny looked at her for a few moments, and then smiled:

"An Awakened, huh? What a pity. I am a Master now."

Rain froze and threw a shocked glance at him.

"You are a Master? As in… an Ascended? Wait… what?"

His smile slowly grew smug.

"Indeed, I am. Do you know what that means?"

She hesitated.

"What?"

Sunny leaned forward and said in a friendly tone:

"Why, it means that my lessons will be much more expensive, of course!"

He laughed, then grew silent, and added after a short pause:

"Oh, also… I might have missed you a tiny bit, too…"

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...A dark river flowed through a cavernous expanse of black stone. Fog nestled on the water, stifling its quiet murmurs and veiling everything in white. A lone source of light was traveling through the fog, tearing a path through it.

It was a slender gondola cut from onyx, with a glass lantern hanging on its bow. A pristine white flame burned within the lantern, straining against the confines of its crystal prison. The fog opened up before the gondola, and then silently closed behind.

A young woman with silver hair and ivory skin was curled into a ball, sleeping on the bottom of the onyx boat. In the stark light of the lantern, her face seemed deathly pale and vulnerable.

On the stern of the gondola stood a skeleton dressed in rags. He was working the oar, staring into the fog or at the young woman. Despite the fact that the skeleton had no lungs, no lips, and no tongue, he was humming a song.

"One day the gods will fall

And reveal their lie

The one who sleeps will awaken

To devour his children

Oh, and us all

That which was forgotten

Will be remembered

And consume the world

Oh, all of us will dream

The nightmare

Of the Forgotten God…"

As he sang, the young woman stirred, and then slowly opened her eyes. The skeleton grew silent, glanced at her, then said:

"Good morning, creature. How have you slept?"

She sat up straight and did not answer, staring at the skeleton with tired grey eyes.

The boatman waited for a bit, then shrugged.

"Are you feeling well? You… you have not been speaking much these past few weeks, creature. Has your mind finally gone?"

The young woman remained silent, making the skeleton uncomfortable. He shook his head.

"Huh… something about you feels different today. Your shadow… it seems to have grown deeper? How peculiar!"

There was no answer.

They continued to sail in silence for a while. Slowly, the fog receded, revealing a black shore. The skeleton changed the course of the boat and let it drift until its bottom scraped against the rock.

There, he let go of the oar and sighed.

"This is it, creature. That is as far as I go."

The young woman remained motionless for a while, then stood up and touched the lantern, letting the white flame travel from it to her

palm. After that, she jumped onto the shore, staggered, and slowly straightened herself, looking into the darkness.

Finally, she spoke:

"How close are we to that place?"

The skeleton shrugged.

"Close enough, I'd wager. Uh… sorry for lying to you, by the way. In my defense, you only have yourself to blame, creature! Who would be foolish enough to believe that anyone can cross the Underworld? This place is not for the likes of us to traverse. Getting this close to its inner border is already a miracle."

He hesitated for a while, then added:

"Are you sure that you want to go on? There are worse fates than death, creature. Trust me… I should know."

The young woman glanced at him, then asked:

"What about you? What will you do?"

The skeleton laughed.

"Me? Oh, I don't know. Now that I've been taken off that damned tree, there's not much time left for me to exist. Maybe I'll try to find what remains of the Shadow Realm, to have a proper death. Maybe I'll just go back and tease Azarax for a while, one last time. That fellow was really insufferable, you know.

Spending an eternity in his company was the greatest punishment of all! A piece of advice… choose your eternal companions carefully, creature."

The young woman lingered for a few moments, then nodded and walked into the darkness. Her steps were steady.

Then, without turning her head, she said:

"Thank you, Eurys. Farewell."

The skeleton watched her go, and then sighed.

"What a foolish abomination… still, I wish her luck. Even though I don't know what she seeks, I hope she finds it."

As the young woman walked further and further away, the light of her flame grew distant and dim. The darkness surrounded the skeleton, and the white fog flowed slowly in his direction, as if wishing to consume him.

Eurys watched the fog draw closer, and then sighed again.

"...She is not as foolish as me, at least."

Then, the white mist swallowed him, and his voice abruptly fell quiet.

Soon, impenetrable darkness reigned the cold river once again.

…And far in the distance, a lonely spark of light continued to climb higher and higher, soon disappearing from view.

[End of volume four: Chain Breaker.]